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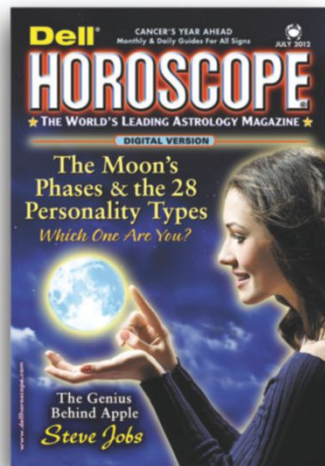
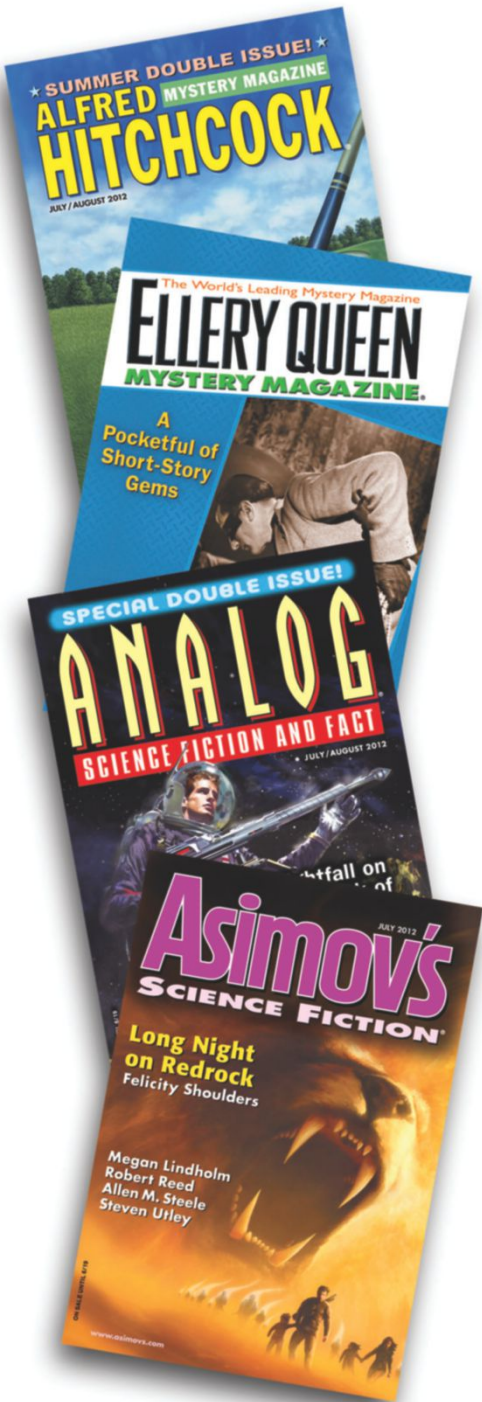
**Biology
at the
End
of the
World**

**Brenda
Cooper**

**Jim Grimsley
Vylar Kaftan
Sam J. Miller
Jason Sanford**

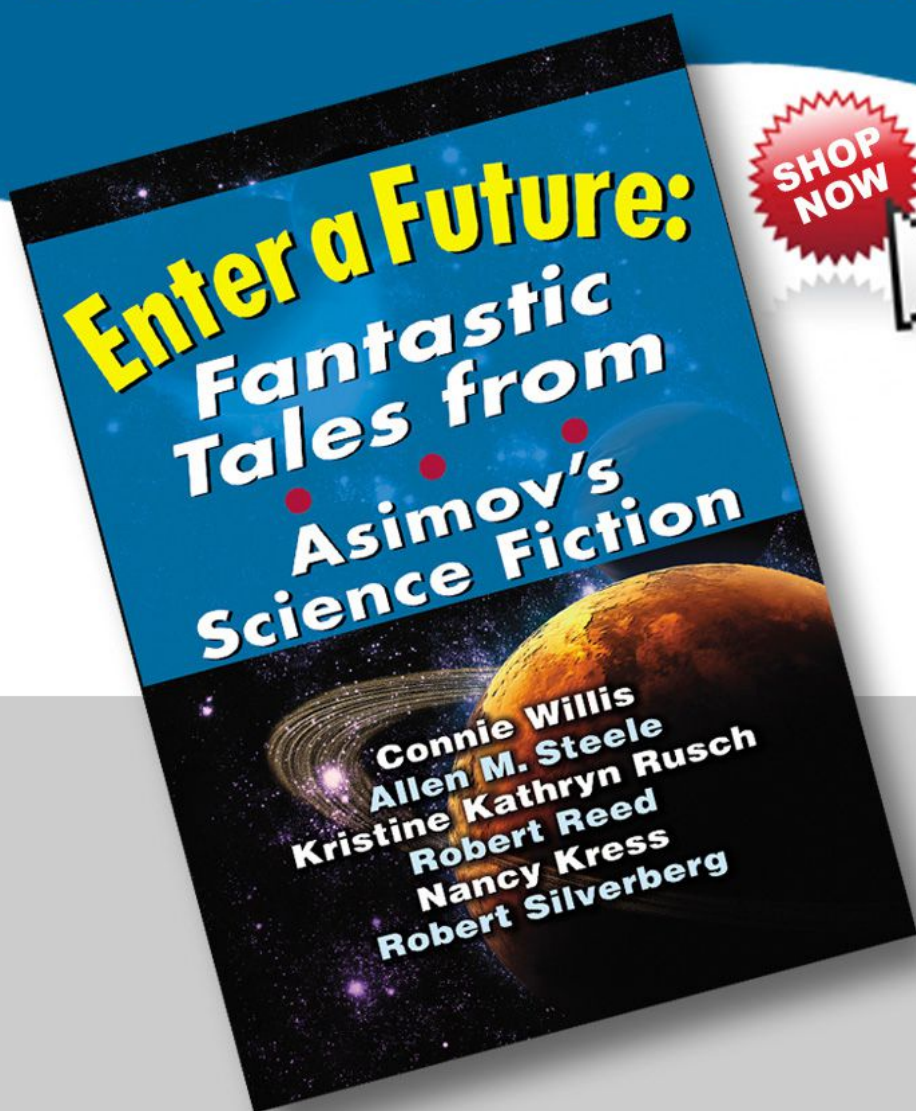
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SEPTEMBER 2015

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TWO MEMORIALS

In the past few months, Tanith Lee and Melanie Tem, two authors that *Asimov's* has been honored to publish, have been lost to death's unknown land. Both women were excellent storytellers with evocative prose styles. Both won their share of World Fantasy, World Horror, and other awards. Their fiction was among the best we've ever showcased, and we are thankful we had the chance to do so.

I'm not sure if I ever met Tanith Lee in person. We worked together, though, through the mail and later email, on seventeen stories. These tales were suffused with unforgettable characters and mysterious lands. The first, "La Reine Blanche" (July 1983), contains both. It begins: "The white queen lived in a pale tower, high in a shadowy garden. She had been shut there three days after the death of her husband, the king. Such a fate was traditional for certain of the royal widows. All about, between the dark verdures of the dark garden, there stared up similar pale towers in which similar white queens had, for centuries, been immured. Most of the prisoners were by now deceased. Occasionally, travelers on the road beneath claimed to have glimpsed—or to have thought that they glimpsed—a dim skeletal shape or two, in senile disarray, peering blindly from the tall narrow windows, which were all the windows these towers possessed, over the heads of the trees, toward the distant spires of the city."

While there is the hint of the familiar fairy tale in this lush opening, there is also the promise that "La Reine Blanche" will veer off in whichever fantastic direction Tanith's fierce imagination decreed. The same was true of the tales that contained the ghosts, vampires, and werewolves of traditional horror.

Tanith was also a fierce taskmaster. One can see the hand of the consummate artist in her concern for the perfection of

the minutiae. Her submission letter for "Cold Fire" (February 2007) came with the following, "This tale has some weird grammar and syntax and some odd words—so I've enclosed a note and checklist for compositors. . . . I have to say the mode of language in this really took me by surprise. But my characters often do. Ideally I'd love to have left out all the apostrophes too. But given the general syntax, thought I had better put them in." Later, she despairs that we will ever get the story right, "Given the tiny amount of time left before proofs need to be perfect, I find this [emails gone astray] very upsetting. . . . I have done my best. But I really do want the story to appear as I wrote it." Doing our best to get it right is worthwhile a year later when she tells us: "Please find another sub. . . . very unlike the last one—which last story I VERY much enjoyed seeing in the magazine! (Thank you again, and to all concerned on keeping the weird syntax etc as I had it.)"

Our October/November 2010 issue featured her last *Asimov's* story. "Torhec the Sculptor" is an artist who truly creates art solely for art's sake—destroying his pieces before they can be sullied by public consumption:

"Torhec laid the hammer aside and took up the first of the group of flasks also ready on the bench. They contained special mixes of corrosive. As he poured them over the last of his work, the audience watched in wonder as wood and stone bubbled and smoked, curling over, melting, flowing down to unidentifiable puddles on the floor. Torhec finalized things with the hammer, bashing to dust any lingering element."

Fortunately, Tanith left us readers with ninety novels and three hundred short stories. Like timeless fairy tales, her work should be enjoyed for generations to come.

I knew Melanie Tem for close to thirty years. I'm sure we first met at a convention, but my fondest memory is a fall walk through Central Park collecting pine cones and talking about children and the adoption process. Although primarily known for horror and dark fiction novels, Melanie sold eight stories to *Asimov's*. Two of these tales were coauthored with her husband Steve Rasnic Tem. In another conversation, Melanie explained that she and Steve had collaborated on their family name as well as their fiction. It's taken from the ancient Egyptian word that means "to complete or finish." It is also another name for the god Atum, the primal creator.

Melanie wrote beautiful, haunting stories of loss: loss of children, loss of siblings, loss of self. I found her novelette "Corn Teeth" (August 2011), about a human child awaiting an alien adoption, so powerful that I could barely finish reading it. Still, I knew that it told an important tale that had to be published. The story was inspired by her experience as an adoption social worker.

Another of my favorites was the collaborative "In Concert" (December 2008). This bittersweet tale connected the hopes and fears of a lost astronaut and an elderly woman. It was also the title story of Melanie and Steve's most recent collection of cowritten short stories. Sadly, the ending can be read as a farewell to authors who leave us far too soon:

"She floated into deep space, too. Soon he would drift beyond her ability to track him. Soon, she thought, she herself would drift beyond her ability to come back.

"Thank you," was in her mind, moving with the music, back and forth.

The music was sweet, and sad, but Inez could not think of it as elegiac, exactly. More, it was resolute, solemn in its understanding. Her face was cold and wet.

The sound of a single string, played solo within the wash of music, caught her attention. It rose and fell in pitch, singing in concert like prayer. It was a solitary thought, a nerve, a vein, a narrow thread of muscle.

While the body and the world disintegrated around it, it lingered a moment, then dissolved. Thank you." ○

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Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our guidelines. Look for them online at www.asimovs.com or send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size (#10) envelope, and a note requesting this information. Write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. We prefer electronic submissions, but the address for manual submissions and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 44 Wall Street, Suite 904, New York, NY 10005-2352. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

THE SIXTH PALACE

More than fifty years ago I wrote a short story called “The Sixth Palace,” which Frederik Pohl published in *Galaxy*, the top science fiction magazine of the day. Subsequently it was reprinted in a number of anthologies and translated into three or four foreign languages, and generally it has been held in high regard by SF readers over the years. I like the story myself and have used it in several of my own collections of my work, most recently one called *To the Dark Star* (Subterranean Press, 2007).

The story begins with a quotation that is drawn, though I don’t say so in the text, from ancient Hebrew mystical literature:

Ben Azai was deemed worthy and stood at the gate of the sixth palace and saw the ethereal splendor of the pure marble plates. He opened his mouth and said twice, “Water! Water!” In the twinkling of an eye they decapitated him and threw eleven thousand iron bars at him. This shall be a sign for all generations that no one should err at the gate of the sixth palace.

—Lesser Hekhaloth

From that starting point I go on to tell the tale of two soldiers of fortune who travel to a small world orbiting the star Valzar, where a fabulous treasure is known to be guarded by a gigantic robot who will admit to the treasure vault only that person who can correctly answer a series of difficult questions. Anyone who fails to give the proper answers will be immediately annihilated. It’s a classic fairy-tale plot, converted into science fiction by setting it on an alien world and

using a robot instead of a dragon as the guardian of the treasure. One of the two protagonists answers seventeen of the questions correctly; but when he gives a correct answer to the eighteenth, the robot strikes him dead. The other man, pondering this sequence of events, arrives at an understanding of what has taken place and devises a stratagem that he hopes will spare him from a similar fate. And so it does; he deals shrewdly with another set of questions and the robot opens the treasure vault to him. But then, as so often happens in fairy tales—well, read the story yourself to find out how it ends.

I knew, at the time I wrote the story, that the quotation that had provided me with the basic plot situation must have come from some Jewish source: “Ben Azai” is a Hebrew name, and “Lesser Hekhaloth” sounded Hebrew to me also and was, perhaps, the name of some Kabbalistic text. But that was all I knew, back in February 1964. The story itself owes more to Zen Buddhism for its plot than Judaism, anyway. I don’t regard myself as an expert either in Zen or in Judaism, though I do know how to tell a story, and in “The Sixth Palace” I used the rabbinical anecdote to fashion a pretty good piece of SF. Who Ben Azai was and where the text of the Lesser Hekhaloth might be found, I had no idea, nor did I have any record of where I had come upon that quotation. I am of Jewish birth myself, but not particularly well versed in the arcana of the Jewish religion, and I must have stumbled across the Ben Azai story in some secondary source. Over the years I continued to wonder about Ben Azai and the Lesser Hekhaloth. Around 1975 I asked Avram Davidson, the most Orthodox of my Jewish friends, about them, but he, for all his

extraordinary erudition, was unable to provide any information. And in time I came to assume I would never know.

No knowledge remains lost forever, though, especially theological knowledge, and here in the far future that is the twenty-first century we have a thing called Google that penetrates all mysteries at the click of a mouse. I suppose that at any time in the last decade I could have looked up “Hekhaloth” or “sixth palace” on my computer and found the origin of my story, but it didn’t occur to me to do so. And then, one day late in 2014, there came an e-mail from Boruch Perl of Brooklyn, who has made a careful study of Jewish mystical lore. “The quote,” he told me, “is from *Jewish Gnosticism: Merkabah Mystic and Talmudic Tradition*, by Gershom Scholem.” It is drawn, he said, from “an extremely obscure book of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and is based on an incident recorded in the Talmud (Hagigah 1)” in which “Ben Azai gazed (at the Divine Presence) and was killed. . . .” I had heard of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the great German-born scholar who from 1933 until his retirement in 1965 held the post of Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Mr. Perl provided me with a link to the text of the Gershom Scholem book. I was at my computer in a flash.

Eureka!

There was the whole story, the mere edge of which I had come upon in 1964 and used as the inspiration for that tale in *Galaxy*.

The Hekhaloth Books, Scholem explained, were part of a group of Jewish mystic texts, well over a thousand years old, including, among others, the Greater Hekhaloth, the Lesser Hekhaloth, and a book called *Merkabah Rabbah*. “Hekhaloth,” in Hebrew, means “palace” or “temple.” It is in the Lesser Hekhaloth, says Scholem, that the famous Jewish hero Rabbi Akiva, who lived from about A.D. 40 to 135, tells the tale of his journey to heaven in the company of three fellow rabbis, Ben Zoma, Ben Avuyah, and . . .

Ben Azai! They discovered as they went that the Lord God of Israel “sitteth within seven palaces, one within another. And at the entrance to each palace are eight doorkeepers, four to the right of the lintel and four to the left of the lintel. These be the names of the doorkeepers of the first palace: Lahabhiel, and Kashrael, Zekhuthiel, Tophhiel, and Lahariel, Mathkiel, and Shuwael. And there be those who say, ‘And Shubhael.’”

I read on, fascinated, as the ancient text listed the names of all the doorkeepers of the inner palaces and described the complicated process by which those who would enter into the presence of the Lord God must placate them. (“When thou comest and standest at the entrance of the first palace take two seals in thy hands, one that of Totrosi’ai the Lord and one that of Surya the Prince of the Presence. Show that of Totrosi’ai the Lord to those standing to the left. . . . Straightway they seize thee, one from thy right and one from thy left until they bring thee and hand thee over to Taghriel and Mathpiel and make thy peace with them and warn them concerning thee. Now Taghriel is the prince who is the head of the entrance of the second palace and standeth to the right of the lintel, and Mathpiel is the prince who standeth to the left of the lintel with him. . . .”) I must point out that although, as I said, I am Jewish by birth, I have never had any sort of religious belief, and to me these mystical figures had no more real meaning than Zeus or Odin, or, for that matter, than Tyrion Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen, or Bilbo Baggins and Aragon, Lord of the Western Lands, or the stalwart warriors of E.R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*. They are all characters out of fantasy fiction, to me. I realize that others do feel differently about the textual matter of their religions, and that the gatekeepers of the seven palaces may be true realities to them, whereas to me Taghriel and Mathpiel are just figures in a story, a story that somebody made up just as surely as George R.R. Martin made up the tale of

the struggle for the throne of the Seven Kingdoms. I mean no offense to these people when I say that. I read on and on, wide-eyed, as excited by the Hekhalothic account of the seven palaces as I might have been by an account of Queen Daenerys's romance with Frodo, and for just about the same reasons.

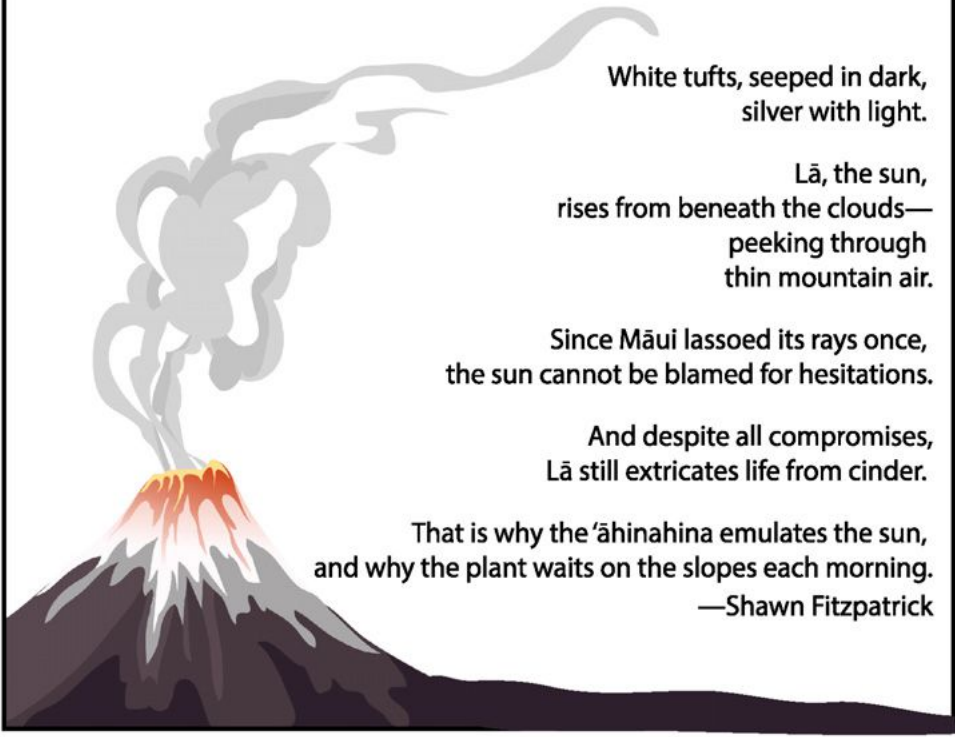
So the rabbis, obeying their instructions, present the proper seals to the proper doorkeepers, and make their way, palace after palace, to the inner realms of the Lord's dwelling. These doorkeepers are a fearsome bunch. At the sixth palace the head doorkeepers are Kazpiel and Dumiel, "whose bows are strung and stand before them, their swords are sharpened and in their hands. And lightnings flow and issue forth from the balls of their eyes, and spiderwebs of fire from their nostrils and torches of fiery coals from their mouths. . . ." We see the adventurous rabbis presenting the appropriate seals to Kazpiel, "whose sword is drawn in his hand, and there issue forth from it lightnings, and he shaketh it against everyone who is not fit to behold the King and his throne, and there is no creature who may stay his hand. And his sword crieth and saith: 'Pain!'" Some who come before him he slays at once; for the more fortunate he will "bring thee a whirlwind and seat thee in a chariot of brilliance and trumpet before thee as eight thousands of myriads of horns and three thousands of myriads of rams' horns and four thousands of myriads of bugles. . . ." Those who survive Kazpiel go next to Dumiel, another ferocious figure who stands ready to destroy anyone he deems undeserving of being passed inward to the seventh and final palace, which is Paradise, where the Lord God Himself resides.

The four rabbis meet varying fates. Rabbi Akiva tells us that he "entered safely and came out safely," though he does not tell us how he achieved this.

Ben Zoma's glimpse of Paradise drives him mad. Ben Avuyah, a rabbi as famed for his scholarship as Akiva, undergoes an even more terrible metamorphosis, emerging as a heretic, a blasphemer, and a libertine, so villainous that thenceforth his name is never mentioned in sacred texts except under the euphemism, "The Other One." And poor Ben Azai, as the epigraph to my story describes, makes it as far as the gate of the sixth palace, but his outcry of "Water! Water!" at the sight of the marble walls is the fatal error that causes the doorkeeper Kazpiel to smite him with his sword. We know not why, for who can fathom the ways of the Almighty and His doorkeepers? And—here is the Zen angle to my story—I seized on the idea that the proper behavior at the gate to the sixth palace might not necessarily be what we mortals consider to be rational behavior, and from that I generated my story.

So—thanks to Boruch Perl of Brooklyn—I know at last where the strange little anecdote that long ago gave me the starting point for a story came from. I have learned once again of the power of Google, for if you run searches, as I did, for "Hekhaloth," "sixth palace," or "Gershon Scholem," you will be granted more information about the gates and their keepers than you can possibly absorb. And, finally, by making this belated attempt to find the source of my story, I came upon a remarkable mystical tale abounding in mighty figures and potent imagery ("At the door of the seventh palace stand angry all the heroes, warlike, strong, harsh, fearful, terrific, taller than mountains and sharper than peaks") which, though for some it may have true religious significance, had for me the sort of visionary force that I have found in some of the classics of heroic fantasy, or, even closer to the mark, in some of the most powerful tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*. ○

HALEAKALĀ: HOUSE OF THE SUN



White tufts, seeped in dark,
silver with light.

Lā, the sun,
rises from beneath the clouds—
peeking through
thin mountain air.

Since Māui lassooed its rays once,
the sun cannot be blamed for hesitations.

And despite all compromises,
Lā still extricates life from cinder.

That is why the 'āhinahina emulates the sun,
and why the plant waits on the slopes each morning.

—Shawn Fitzpatrick

The book cover features a central image of a woman's face, looking directly at the viewer. The background is a deep purple and blue sky filled with stars and soft, wispy clouds. The title 'A WOMAN'S LIBERATION' is printed in large, white, serif capital letters across the top half of the cover, partially overlapping the woman's forehead and the sky.

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Brenda Cooper <www.brenda-cooper.com> writes science fiction and fantasy novels and short stories. Her most recent novel is *Edge of Dark* (Pyr 2015). Brenda will also be releasing a short fantasy collection and longer science fiction collection in 2015. The author is a technology professional and a futurist, and publishes nonfiction on the environment and the future. Her nonfiction has appeared on *Slate* and *Crosscut*, and her short fiction has appeared in *Nature* magazine as well as other venues. Brenda lives in the Pacific Northwest in a household with three people, three dogs, and far more than three computers. Her new story for *Asimov's* takes a look at the dangers and the promise of research into . . .

BIOLOGY AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Brenda Cooper

Sumot's red coat flashed brightly in the artificial sun, a beacon that showed my trajectory down the zip chair from the observation cliff to the landing platform. A flock of parrots rose screeching in affront at the brightly colored humans penetrating their forest, a riotous dance of glittering color and noise. The audacity of the birds clawed an unseemly screech of pleasure from my throat. The tops of trees closed over me, hiding the parrots and displaying life in all of the greens and browns possible to imagine.

It looked as beautiful as the advertisements, like a perfect place for space ecotourists. Maybe too perfect, since our bosses had sent us here.

I landed behind Sumot with a thump as the mag locks in my boots recognized the platform and stuck me to it. I freed myself with a short orgy of unclipping and tying and hanging and neatening my hair with my fingers. I pulled my uniform shirt tight through the strap of my waist-pack, trying to look professional in spite of the sticky air. I glanced at Sumot in hopes of an approving look, but she faced away from me, looking down. On her back, the words *Resist, Remember, and Respect* were embroidered in a neat line, a bright yellow against the red of her shirt. I whispered them to myself. *Resist. Remember. Respect.*

We resisted the temptation to change the world via genetic engineering, we remembered the mistakes humans made in the past, we respected life in its natural form. We

were the barrier between greed and life, between hunger for profit and love of nature, between destruction and salvation.

This was my third inspection. The first two had turned up clean. With luck, this one would be clean, too.

A vertical ladder connected the landing platform to the biome floor. At the bottom of the ladder, the Rising Jungle biome's principal manager, Dr. Harv Ling, waited patiently in a clearing under a shefflera tree. Parrots still screeched far above us. Closer, finches twittered and called. Damp, earthy scents filled the air, sweet and full of life.

Dr. Ling's handshake was firm, and his words welcoming in spite of his wary eyes. "Good to see you, Inspectors." He nodded at Sumot. "Dr. Sumot Kundi," and then blinked and pulled my name from memory as well. "Candidate Doctor Paulette Rain."

Since Sumot had both a decade and two ranks on me, she returned his greeting in the polite, formal language of the Bureau of Diversity Protection. "Hello, Dr. Ling. Thank you for the tour. We appreciate the opportunity to see so much of your excellent work."

"Follow me?" His features failed to hide how unwelcome we were. We were taught how to notice the feelings that people want to bury, the fear under formality, the disdain under wide-open smiles. This man wished we were on the far side of the Solar System.

We followed him along a raised pathway, armed with scissors and collection bags. I carefully clipped and labeled leaves, lured insects into cups, held tiny tree frogs in my hand and tipped them into boxes, and captured a spider as big as my palm in a sealed bag. Sumot took photographs and video and asked piercing questions that Dr. Ling answered smoothly.

Everything looked healthy and natural. Thus, it took me by surprise when Sumot interrupted the tour at an intersection between the raised walkway and a faint path in the forest. "Please take us north a klik."

He glared at her, and for a second I saw refusal in his eyes. But we were tracked and recorded and recording, and our minders, Alin and Suzanne, watched over us from our ship. He had no choice. As we left the main path, the jungle closed around us, leaves brushed our shoulders and hair, and roots threatened to trip our feet. Bromeliads clung to tree trunks, displaying bright curtains of yellow and red flowers.

The trail thinned into a whisper. "Further," Sumot told him.

"We might damage the soil," he said, his face a mask.

"We might," she said, and walked ahead of him, perhaps following some clue from one of our watchers. She stopped in a small clearing full of flowers and butterflies, the soil damp and mossy. She whispered to me. "Look up."

A profusion of bright orchids hung in the canopy, some with flowers so big they set off red flags in my brain. Of course, it was hard to tell what grew differently because the biome was in orbit, and what was gene-modded, but the flowers screamed money.

Crime almost always screamed money.

As Sumot flew one of our three precious drones up to collect a flower, I watched over Dr. Ling, recording his body language for later analysis and court evidence, should we need it. I kept my own expressions as neutral as possible, but I wasn't going to need analysis to confirm that he was guilty. I may have only been an inspector for a year, but my training was impeccable.

Back aboard the U.N. biodiversity protection ship *Orion 8*, we plugged the samples we had into analysis machines. I cupped the harvested orchid in my gloved hand and admired the petals, thinking that the magenta and yellow flower would cover my whole face if I held it up in front of me. In the folded center of the flower, pale white and pink led to yellow, which drew my gaze back to a red the color of a beating heart. Still, I steeled myself and crushed it down into the metal jaws of the machine.

"It's hard to imagine," Sumot mused, "That something so beautiful can represent evil."

My job as a hero protecting the Earth's natural biodiversity included murdering anything that had been changed by more than about 5 percent. So far, destroying entire biomes had been a theoretical part of my job. That was likely to change. The flower almost certainly wouldn't pass, and while one simple thing of beauty was barely worth mourning, the entire biome would be cleansed of the flower. Seed, root, stem, samples, and digital data would all die. DNA signatures would enter our multiply locked databases of forbidden life.

If we found more, the entire biome would need to be destroyed. I knew why—we'd lost the Congo to biohackers, and my father had lost his father in the three-day biohacker war that followed. I had not been part of a destruction order yet, and I thought of the parrots and let a small prayer for clean genetics escape my lips.

Sumot brushed her long, dark hair back over her shoulders and focused on an incoming message. Her eyes went soft-focus, and her lips twitched as she looked up and through her lenses at a message her glasses obscured from me; something with high security. When she refocused, she said, "Let's go. We have a whistleblower."

I glanced out of the window at the Rising Jungle, which still held our ship in the embrace of its largest docking arms. "More samples?"

"Not from here."

That she wouldn't say any more was telling. I followed her to our ship's bay and found a tall, slim man already suited and waiting for us, his helmet clutched under his arm. His thin face looked even more wary than Dr. Ling's had appeared when we stood right under the red orchids. Under his mistrust of us, I felt a sadness that seemed to infect every muscle, every movement, and every sound. And as if wary fear and sadness were not enough, I also sensed guilt.

The guilt ran so deep that he might be hiding it from himself.

Sumot nodded at him, but didn't say anything, so I followed her lead and suited up in silence.

On the other side of the lock, we headed for the second meeting ship. Sumot had started the testing process before we got there, and the ship recorded only one bug found, a surprising slice of pretty code that had come in with a repair tech and lived in the water monitoring system. Sumot and I shared this data in silence and only with each other. I watched her face as she destroyed the bug, noting the triumph in her eyes as she verified it had been eradicated.

She released the docking mechanisms, and the ship flowed out through the bay doors using only the tiniest of thrusters to keep us safe from the edges. We floated free, surrounded by stars on three sides. The station bulked above us, turning the tiny meeting-ship into an ant.

Once we were safely away from ship and station, we stripped off our helmets. The man's large, brown eyes looked from place to place quickly, never settling long on anything. His voice sounded breathy. "Is this safe?" he asked.

Sumot was always careful. "It tests clear. We cannot ever know."

His head bobbed up and down, and he swallowed. "Call me Joe."

"Okay." Sumot did not offer our names. He knew them, or he didn't need to know them.

"You know about the smaller research stations?" he said. "The academics?"

Sumot inclined her head, her severe ponytail bobbing with the motion. "We inspect them."

"You miss the university stations." He licked his lips. "The ones from private institutions. The ones that the billionaires invest in but never talk about."

Sumot's lips thinned, a sign she was frustrated with the man's indirectness. "You came to tell us about something that disturbs you."

"Something that frightens me."

Sumot didn't respond, and he seemed to be trying to draw up courage. He chewed on his lower lip. A man whose mouth gave away his feelings. His eyes settled on Sumot, and he said, "There is a whole made ecosystem in a university station. Chai Agriculture's third station."

I almost blurted out that he was lying. Sumot remained calm, professional enough to clarify. "Made and not simply changed?"

He nodded. Then he said it, as if it needed to be said again. "Made. Yes, Made."

"All of it?"

He nodded again.

"Do you know why?" Sumot asked. Her voice had the slightest tremble in it.

He nodded a third time, swallowed, and tears glistened in the edges of his eyes. "To save the world."

Sumot questioned him for some time, and I took careful hand notes that could not be copied easily once we left the meeting ship. He nearly cried his way through it, and yet he seemed unaccustomed to so much emotion. Regardless, I found it hard to sympathize with him, and also hard to believe him. The tale he spun was so frankly fantastic that it sounded like something from a science fiction novel. Not that life could be made; we have known how to make life for a long time. But a complex ecosystem with all of it made? One full of higher-order animals?

The fear of it made me cold and a little shaky. This fear drove funding for DNASec and the Bureau of Diversity Protection and the Biodiversity Police. This fear created us, and the man had the fear, and I had the fear, and Sumot sat there in silence and didn't show it, but I knew she had the fear, too.

Fear drove Joe to betray friends and maybe a dream he had once dreamed. He didn't say so directly but it felt like that. The organisms he referenced were the fairy dreams of techno-society: floating water cleaners capable of breathing life into the dead zones on the ocean, coral designed to survive heat and recover from the pounding of storm-driven waves, whales who could live with the myriad noises of humanity and still talk to their own tribes.

By the time the last story and the last details had been wrung from him, I felt utterly exhausted, and my hand hurt from the unfamiliar activity of writing so long on paper with a pen. Joe looked exhausted and thinned, as if some of the life had gone from him in the telling of secrets. I had witnessed two other whistleblower conversations, and I was accustomed to the tellers feeling buoyant that their great secrets were gone, or that their own guilt could now be assuaged without prison time, but this man seemed to feel as if he had failed utterly.

Sumot showed no outward emotion at all, but I read the set of her jaw and the tightness in her shoulders as controlled anger and determination. I expected that we would leave immediately, or set up a different meeting ship to pass the information we had gained to our superiors.

Instead, we returned to the station and Sumot took my notes from me and locked them into a cabinet that only she could open. "Do not speak of this," she said.

The next morning, the machines spit out their answers as Sumot and I sat in her office sharing morning coffee. Sumot summed them up. "The orchids were just the showiest sin. They've also changed the *banisteriopsis caapi* vine to make it tell you deeper dreams. They're selling it through a black-market operation known as Vision Squared; they say it's a way to escape to a new world without machines or electronics, and they promise the spirits of plants will cleanse your soul." She sounded slightly bitter about that one. But then she believed in the ability of plants to save the world, but only if they were completely unaltered by humans. I agreed, although I wasn't out to undo every rose graft that had ever been done.

“How did you find that link?”

“I didn’t. The machines sent drones out as soon as they had results, and we did the *caapi* vine first.”

More came over the next few days, subtle but undeniable. The parrots were made to be brighter and ever-so-slightly smarter. I had wanted them to be clean. Even though that wouldn’t have saved them, it would have made me feel better. I had found them so beautiful.

Sumot and I sat together in the ship’s bar after a grueling day. “Will you give them a stay?”

“No. I did that once before, and it gave the people so much hope. It makes it worse to stay an execution, like the silliness that is death row. We do not do that up here.”

“I can see how it’s cruel in some ways. But what if we need more time?” The parrots. I had become fixated on the parrots and on wanting to save them, even though I hadn’t opened my mouth about it and told her. She would merely laugh at me and tell me to toughen up.

“We know there is bioengineering here. We don’t need more time.” She looked totally resolved, totally sure of herself.

Surely my hesitation was just from being young in my job.

I sat behind Sumot as reporters from major stations and from the biggest metroplexes left on Earth grilled her. Sumot always kept her facts straight. She refused reporter-bait. Somehow, the very flat surety of her delivery, and the fact that every part of her agreed—that her feelings were completely clear—made the report even more chilling.

Two days later, DNasec agents took all of the humans off of the biome station. They sent the tourists and low-level employees like housekeepers home, and threw everyone else into custody. On their way out, uniformed men and women turned off every system that powered life on the ship. They left a stew of robots and nanotechnology behind. These opened the biome to space, dismantled and destroyed the mechanical systems, harvested the entire operation for metals and recyclables, and turned what had once been carbon-based life into fuel.

This third expedition meant that I was no longer a candidate doctor of biodiversity. I had passed. That mostly meant I was a full-fledged investigative biodiversity policewoman, but the title acknowledged my skills in biology as well. Sumot held a party in my honor in her rooms, and toasted me. When I raised my glass, and she smiled at me, her face full of unabashed approval, I felt good. That was the only good moment during the Rising Jungle assignment.

We stayed to witness the death. Cameras detailed the last flight of the parrots, and even the slightly slower death of the great rooted trees and the wilting of the beautiful red flowers. One night, Sumot stood close to me and said, “You know that we must be ruthless.”

I nodded and kept my face schooled in obedient neatness. I remembered one class in my senior year. We had a heated debate about invasives. I had gone all righteous about the historic morality of hunting barred owls to “save” spotted owls. The real-life experiment had failed completely. Barred owls had evolved better skills for northwest forests than the native owls they were replacing, and murdering one species did not help the other thrive. Of course, humans had not created barred or spotted owls, but had simply tried to choose between them.

If we hadn’t been able to choose wisely a mere hundred years ago, how would we choose now with a far more tender ecosystem?

Sumot interrupted my thinking. “We have orders to look for some university agristations.”

I had wondered if we would find this greatest sin ourselves, or if she would call in bigger guns. I already felt unsteady from sleepless nights when I dreamed of

bludgeoning parrots and crying as they fell. Her announcement drove me to the bathroom to empty my stomach. After, I rose, trembling, looking into the mirror. In college, I had known I was choosing a hard career. But somehow I had expected to avoid all of the obstacles, to be charmed.

The agristation was part of a community of college stations, so we flew into a constellation of habitats and ships. Sumot chose to dock the *Orion 8* at the university's main station and take one of our flitters to the agristation: *Chai 3 Tea*. We had no external DNAsec support with us, which implied Sumot hadn't told her superiors everything the whistleblower had said. We did have our own security to camp on our ship at the main station. Alin and Suzanne would be wired in to us through tiny speakers and microphones in our ears, but they weren't in any way equivalent to a DNAsec Special Forces team. Neither of them looked particularly worried, but then Sumot had told them this was routine.

As we left, our guards looked up from their 3D chess game and wished us both luck, Alin smiling as he said, "I'll watch your back."

The call and answer routine that served as password to dock at the agristation was unusually long and complex, and once we passed into the station's airspace, a woman's voice called out, "Sorry for the tough entry. Students, you know. Worst security violators in the world."

A student met us, fresh-faced and long-legged and enthusiastic. She reminded me of myself two years ago, except she was blond and light where I was dark and dark. I tried hard to stay stern with her. After all, if "Joe" had been correct, she might be skipping the real world in favor of jail. I took the girl's offered hand. "Zoka," she said. "I'm Zoka, and I'm first gen space."

Meaning she had been born in space. "I'm Paulette Rain. I came up eight years ago."

"What a lovely name." She led us to separate but connected quarters. A bottle of wine waited in our shared galley, as well as enough VR tools for us to disappear into a game world or have a virtual orgy or ten. There was also a bouquet of lilacs, and a note from the chief scientist, Dr. Tollingson, telling us she would see us in the morning. Sumot inspected the lilacs carefully before she sat down with a huff.

We had only spoken of this one other time, taking a meeting ship out to do so. We had shared our research, which had been carefully done since our records were open. The *Chai 3 Tea* was almost invisible on the nets. What little we found intimated that the station served as a lab for students, and primarily tested automated pollinators. After we caught up, and refreshed ourselves on the notes, I had asked Sumot about our boss's reaction. "What did Henri say when you briefed him?"

"Henri thinks Joe must be lying. That nothing so advanced could be hidden." Her words were choppy. "He said we could go look, and report back. He's assigned a search-web of bots to look at papers coming from *Chai* and analyze them for hidden connections, but he's not sending a ship."

"Even if they find something?"

She shrugged. "Maybe then." Her guard was down further than usual, and a flash of pain touched her face before she banished it with a tightening of her jaws. "I am not Henri's favorite."

Sumot had never shown any sign of weakness, any opening at all. I tried to handle it tenderly. "Maybe the search-web will help us."

"Maybe the search-web will scare Henri as much as Joe scared us."

Sumot sounded frightened. Deeply frightened. It wasn't like her. I didn't know what to say to her, but I absorbed some of her fears.

We didn't speak of it again; nothing that happened on our own ship was secret from history.

We would not speak of it tonight, nor would we touch the gossamer VR gloves or the carbon glasses. Good tech, but undoubtedly a stew of viruses waiting to infect us. Sumot pulled out a deck of old-fashioned cards and dealt me a hand of gin. I found the simple game soothing. Even so, my hands shook enough that Sumot noticed and frowned at me. She herself looked like steel in every part of her demeanor.

I had worked with this woman for a year and couldn't decide if I loved her or if I hated her. Either way, I wanted to be like her. She was always so certain, so undivided.

The next morning at 08:00, Zoka came and offered us a tour. Sumot requested a full set of schematics instead. Zoka looked slightly affronted, but said, "I'll order them up. Can I at least show you the areas adjacent to your suite?"

"Sure," I said, before Sumot could refuse again.

Zoka narrated smoothly, although she never took her eyes completely off of Sumot and me, and seemed stressed whenever she couldn't see us both at once.

I had expected something more like my own school, worn with touches of opulence marred only by plaques that identified the donors of the wood banisters or plush study areas. But the interior looked more like a space ship than a station. Every surface gleamed. The metal handholds and rails looked like installation crews had just finished tightening the last screws, and even the occasional bot that slid quietly past us moved without a single jerk. The air smelled pure with only the slightest spicing of industrial cleaners.

If a place could have micro-expressions, this one would be screaming at me. It would say *listen to my quiet halls, look at how neat and empty I am. I am not a normal university lab. I am not.*

Back in our rooms, the schematics had indeed been delivered—on paper. The letter of the law and not the spirit. Sumot frowned at the huge, bound book that covered the entire kitchen table. I expected her to demand that they take away the offending material and send electronic copies, but she merely smiled at Zoka. "Please send Dr. Tollingson to me at 13:00. We would like to tour three of your biomes this afternoon and inspect the associated labs."

Zoka would have been no good at poker; she flinched. "I'll deliver your message."

After she left, I looked over at Sumot. "I think you hurt her feelings."

Sumot frowned at me. "They assigned her to us because she doesn't have a brain in her head. She can't slip up and tell us things she doesn't even know."

"All right. But let's be nice to her anyway. I like the kid."

"It's best not to get attached to your captors." Sumot paused and raised an eyebrow, clearly trying for a joke. "Stockholm syndrome and all that."

"She's not my captor."

"So let's see that she doesn't become one. I'll look through the plans. Can you take fourteen random pages and compare them to the electronic plans you found online?"

"Those are twenty years old."

"They're better than nothing," she said.

"How am I going to do that while you're using the book?"

"Tear them out."

At least since my promotion she'd started asking me to do things instead of just ordering me around. The paper felt as fine as the station looked clean, smooth under my fingers. Ripping pages loose felt almost as bad as pushing the orchid into the machine. Comparing a projected schematic to a paper one was detailed work, and after three hours I had found nothing, and my eyes stung. "Zip," I reported. "Did you find anything?"

"A pattern. Come here and tell me what you see."

I leaned over her shoulder and watched her flip pages. Her hands were moving in quiet sign. I wasn't fast at reading Sumot's own invented language, and she had to repeat three gestures before I understood her statement that the schematics were correct but incomplete. It wasn't too fresh a tactic, but then there were only so many ways to hide deep secrets from surprise audits.

I gestured back: *How will we find a secret here?*

She shrugged.

Dr. Tollingson showed up right on time at 13:00. She had to slightly fold her tall, angular body in order to fit through the door to our room. Her cropped black hair and black Asian eyes were embedded in skin that looked like it had never breathed an ounce of sunshine. She looked almost comic, although her demeanor was anything but—something between warm and driven, attractive and daunting.

Some people exude leadership.

Zoka trailed Dr. Tollingson, who had the student explain each room we passed through. Zoka had delivered a practiced, smooth tour yesterday; today she stumbled over words and blushed under Dr. Tollingson's watchful gaze.

Sumot paced the edges of every lab, and I asked questions about the active experiments. About an hour into the tour, Zoka led us to a room full of bright light and orderly rows of plants that seemed to march off onto infinity. The beds were grouped in threes, separated from each other with mesh screens. They were filled with young tomato plants in full, yellow flower.

Joe had told us to find a room like this. Maybe this one, maybe another. This wasn't the danger; it led to the danger. I walked up to the closest raised bed. A brief shine caught my eye: three bright robots shaped and colored like bees flitted between flowers. Each was no bigger than the tip of my little finger. From a distance they would be tough to distinguish from the bees on my grandmother's farm. They sounded like real bees, the whole room infused with a background hum that reminded me of late summer.

"The mesh keeps the populations separate," Zoka explained. "Each set of beds is the same. We're testing which machines are better pollinators."

I bent down and looked closely at a bee that had stopped to touch its metal forelegs to a flower. "Why does it have a stinger?"

"If they ever get used in a real ecosystem, they'll need to protect themselves."

"Meaning birds will eat them?"

She laughed nervously. "Birds aren't that stupid. But humans might want to play with them, or even hurt them."

"Is there poison in the stingers?"

She shook her head. "There could be. But we don't load any of the bees while we're testing."

"Are they used on Earth?" I asked her. I knew the big details of Earth farming, and that mechanicals were legal for pollination. A deal with the devil that was better than pollinating by hand or starving, but barely. Extremists hunted the mech bees as if they were real insects that could be exterminated instead of plans that could be reprinted.

"We wouldn't eat farmed food without them. Not in space. There are a few natural pollinators left on Earth, but these are the only space bees out here. After all, we don't have bats or birds, or even rodents."

"Are they your work?"

Zoka glanced briefly at Dr. Tollingson. "I didn't create them. But I tweaked them a little so they aren't as likely to shred the flowers they take the pollen from." She looked quite proud. Once more, I remembered a time when I thought I would save the world all by myself.

Sumot had been staring at the ceiling. "Where do you get your power?" she asked.

Dr. Tollingson replied, "From the Sun, of course. Every light you see is solar-powered. The station is a net-producer, of course, and we charge up research ships that dock here for free."

Sumot was staring up. "What's above this?"

"Above this?"

"Above this." Sumot's gaze was direct and I tried to imitate it, looking serious and un-challengeable.

Zoka looked confused. "Shielding?"

Sumot walked along the outer wall, glancing at the plants and the bees from time to time. She led us to a series of pale and artsy renditions of the letter "Z" that created diagonals to grab onto and two flat surfaces each to stand on. They made a recognizable ladder if you stood directly in front of them. Joe had told us to look for these; until we stood in front of them, I hadn't understood his description. "Have you been up there?" Sumot asked Zoka.

"Up where?" Zoka truly looked puzzled.

Sumot sidled next to the wall and pointed up. Zoka and I followed, and craning our necks, a door became obvious. "No."

Dr. Tollingson said nothing.

Sumot started up the wall. Zoka reached for a handhold. Dr. Tollingson jostled her away gently, as if the graceful doctor had taken a misstep. "After you," she nodded at me. Her demeanor screamed danger from tiny clues I couldn't quite put together.

Sumot was halfway up the wall, counting on me to protect her if she needed it.

I swallowed, thoughts mixed and fast in my head. If I didn't follow, we'd draw attention. It might create a visible rift between us. Sumot might come down, and we might miss whatever we were about to see. But if I followed, we'd be side by side in a vulnerable position.

The tiny jostle decided me. We were in danger whether we climbed the wall or not, so why not climb?

I started up. Three steps into the wall, I glanced down just in time to see a moment of change in Dr. Tollingson's eyes. They started bland and cloaked, and as if a switch turned, they went dark and full of resolve. Her shoulder twitched, a sign that she was doing something with one of her hands behind her back. She smiled, her whole face animated. She sent Zoka up after us, forcing me to continue.

Sumot had nearly reached the door.

An alarm screeched in my ear, followed by a whisper from Alin. "We're being boarded."

Had Dr. Tollingson given that order?

Mechanical bees flew up past me, near me. One bumped my leg and I thought of stingers and nearly lost my footing. I felt the feather-touch of another. Above me, I watched in horror as one stung Sumot.

A defense system? Automatic? Or controlled by someone? I was growing very, very frightened; so frightened I barely managed not to call out.

The door above Sumot opened. Gloved hands reached through.

Zoka hissed, "What's happening?"

I glanced down. Two burly guards had appeared at the bottom of the steps. Dr. Tollingson surrounded Zoka with her body, her feet just a step below the student's feet. She held a weapon in her hand, pointed up, directed precisely at Sumot.

"We're overwhelmed." Alin's voice in my ear stuttered and went silent.

Adrenaline raced through me so fast my thoughts jumbled around Alin and danger and Sumot and duty and the outright certainty I'd made a dreadful mistake taking this wall.

Sumot's feet disappeared.

"Up." Dr. Tollingson gestured with her hand. Zoka's face had paled and grown taut with fear, her eyebrows raised and pulled together, eyes wide.

Three mechanical bees flew around her face. She swatted at one. It fell, but another stung her cheek.

I took another step, another. Something stung my calf. My foot slipped, but my hands held and strange hands leaned through the door and grabbed me, hoisting as if I weighed nothing. My thighs rubbed against a hard, bruising surface and my face impacted cold metal. Rolling over, I looked up at a seamless metal ceiling in a room dominated by two doors.

I had failed to protect Sumot. She lay beside me, Zoka on the other side. The exotic doctor stood, looking down, her face a slightly fuzzy oval. It made her look more comic. I laughed at her.

A man in a mask leaned over Sumot, his thin-gloved fingers fumbling with the zipper on her uniform shirt. Someone removed one of my shoes.

Flesh and white suits and silver walls all blurred together in a dull fog.

The room seemed off-kilter, like a funhouse, and I slid through fuzzy details that should have outraged me and then fell into a dream of mechanical bees and mechanical flowers and clowns.

I woke slowly, my head thick and my thoughts like mist, sensation coming drop by drop. A hard mattress. A thin sheet. Tiny pricks of pain drove into my dry eyes as I rubbed clumsy fingers across them.

A voice. Zoka. "Sumot? Paulette?"

"Yes," I croaked, my voice thick. I could see by then, even push up into a sitting position. My uniform was gone, my body now covered in a white paper suit. To my surprise, I wasn't bound in any way. The room was a song of metal and white, with white charts pinned to a silver board on the wall and a single blue and colored thing. An aquarium.

The faint scent of living water suggested a real aquarium.

None of our captors were in the room.

Sumot hadn't moved at all. I whispered. "Sumot."

Nothing.

"Sumot." Then louder. "Sumot!"

She turned her head and groaned, her eyes glued shut with dried mucus.

"Sumot. Please wake up."

She didn't, relapsing into snores.

I turned to Zoka. "Do you know where we are?"

"I've never been here."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"There's rumors down in the dorms."

"Rumors about?"

"Labs where they hide what they're doing. But I never thought the rumors were real."

Bright blue fish with yellow-edged fins and doleful eyes swam languidly in the aquarium. "Do you know anything that substantiates the rumors?"

"Two students disappeared at the end of last semester, Eliezer and Edie. My roomie sorts the mail and she got a package for Eliezer. The package disappeared." Her voice sounded soft and a little shaken. "But that's not much. I still didn't think it was real."

I counted seven of the fish, all as big as my hand or bigger.

The door flew open and three robot nurses came in, fleshy bodies with white lab coats and fake hair pulled back into tight buns. The one coming toward me smiled. "How do you feel?"

“Okay.”

“I’m going to run a few tests.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Weapons.”

Wow. I didn’t ask what weapons; I didn’t have any except my mind and training. But it suggested a level of paranoia on the part of whoever really ran this place.

Sumot muttered something nasty to the bot working on her.

After a few moments of poking and prodding with various instruments, the robot stopped and said, “The doctor will be right in.”

All three robots left the room, and I finally got a look at Sumot. I recognized fear under her fury, saw the whites of her upper eye and the way her brow wrinkled for just a moment. There was no time to talk to her as the tall doctor strode in, looking severe and followed by two new robots. At first I felt afraid, but then my reasoning mind suggested they didn’t need to see us to harm us. They wanted something.

Dr. Tollingson said, “We estimate there will be three days before DNasec arrives to investigate. We will use those days to give you your inspection. We were almost ready to report on our work anyway. You’ve forced our hand, but only by a few months. All we ask is that you keep an open mind.”

Sumot spoke through the thin line of her lips. “You know what we are and what we do. I will not betray that.”

The doctor’s face softened for a moment. “We both care deeply about the same things. That’s what I need to show you. You came here to investigate. Are you still curious?”

After a pause, Sumot nodded. She was probably curious about what she’d find to destroy this station with. The thought shifted me into looking at Dr. Tollingson and Zoka as people about to lose their future. If we did our job, the fish were going to die. It knotted me up, made me remember the parrots.

Resist, resist, resist.

“You will not be able to say anything to anyone until whenever DNasec gets here.” Dr. Tollingson turned her gaze to me. “Will you keep an open mind?”

“I will do my job.”

Sumot showed neither approval nor disapproval. Dr. Tollingson glanced at Zoka. “You will be reassigned here. Consider the tour your introduction to your next graduate work.”

Zoka looked as frightened as she did pleased. Funny, how often we have contradictory emotional reactions.

“Let’s begin the tour.”

For the first few steps, my legs were heavy and stiff, but they relaxed with motion. I felt strong and alert, as if I had caught up on sleep for the first time in years. The bees had put us to sleep. Maybe it had been for longer than I thought.

The good doctor, the three of us, two robot minders, and a young man who Zoka seemed to recognize filled the hallway, a small river of movement flowing a few hundred feet and turning right into a room so full of aquaria it stunned me. I had never seen so much captured water in one place. Ballast, balance, shielding, reservoir, gardening, a million uses for water on stations and ships. But here we were surrounded. Water above and below and to both sides. No walls, no floor. Only water and life. I spun around, enchanted and suspicious. Even the trained can’t avoid contradictory emotions.

Sumot crossed her arms and squinted at the fish, looking more like an inquisitor than a captive.

Dr. Tollingson nodded at the young man. “Eliezer. Please explain.”

He was tall and swarthy, with intelligent, piercing eyes the same shade of washed-out blue as the water we stood on. "Your agency has stopped the re-seeding of the oceans with animals that can thrive. Instead, you demand life built for the past, designed only by nature, and certain to die in a world that nature no longer controls."

Sumot stiffened.

"Without a healthy ocean, the forests and savannahs and even the deserts are dying. You know this, but because of a few early mistakes, you don't allow anyone to engineer success."

He was speaking as if Sumot and I had come from some ancient species that stopped all progress in the world. But I had seen the fire-ravaged Congo after the carbon mechs were burned out of the trees. A whole jungle, miles and miles and miles of life turned to ash and bone. I remembered what the white bones sounded like when I stepped on them, the way the fire and rockets had burned all of the color from the forest, and trying to walk in the slurry of wet ash that had once been trees.

Resist. Remember. Respect. The mantra of my profession. Eliezer probably hadn't gone into the real world yet. He had no sense of what it was like, he didn't know that idealism was hope and not strategy.

Resist. Remember. Respect.

"But it can be done." He brought his hands up gracefully, like a dancer's, ending with his arms outstretched and his cupped hands facing up. "Look around you. Everything in these walls, this floor, all of it, was created from raw materials. Yes, even the water. This is a vast experiment, which has succeeded beyond our founding team's imagination."

The big tank glowed with color and life. Fish schooled in rainbows of silver, orange, aquamarine, gold, and ochre. Plants grew in orange and yellow, in multiple shades of green never seen on land, and in bright brown. It looked like a video from geography class or a retro-screen saver my college roomie had used as the alarm on her video wall.

Eliezer's voice had dropped to a low cadence, to the soft moment in a poetry reading. "Water and fish, weed and shell, sand and shark, coral and crustacean. It was created."

Sumot, arms still crossed, interrupted Eliezer's poetic recitation. "Prove it isn't a hologram."

Zoka moved her hand toward a tank and a blue striped fish that looked like it belonged in the angel family darted off, followed by three others like it. Then a huge orange fish with red lips approached Zoka's pointing finger, which hung in the air near the wall, shaking, almost touching. Zoka looked at Eliezer with shiny eyes. "You must have used real DNA."

"Real." Dr. Tollingson looked proud, and like she was trying to hide that pride from us. "But not original. We created this entire ecosystem instead of starting with code stolen from the Earth's seas and changing it. We studied and mapped mutations in our original fish for two generations, but *we built everything you see from scratch*. We improved." She paused. It was a habit of hers to pause for effect. I imagined lectures with her must have been tough. When she started again she was looking past us, as if into some magical future. "Everything in these tanks can interact with what lives in the sea, and some can interbreed . . ."

Sumot's intake of breath was blade-sharp.

"... and all of it can survive continued changes in pH and toxicity better than others. Changes in either direction—as the world gets better, they'll survive that. But this is only the beginning. This is the repopulation. This is the future of the sea, but not the repair of it."

Resist meant resist the lure of humanity as god, *resist* meant resist change, *resist* stories that have no meaning. *Resist* the lure of technology-based solutions to biological problems. As we followed Eliezer and Dr. Tollingson down the long corridor, we walked on water.

Technology amazed me and pressed in on me, technology tempted me and tortured me.

Twice, when I glanced at Sumot, her eyes were closed. Once, the look she gave me suggested that whatever she saw in my face was as anathema to her as the darting, schooling fish beneath my feet.

Eliezer and Dr. Tollingson had fallen silent. They walked quietly, their feet slipping easily across the floor. Our paper shoes were noisier, and behind us, Zoka's paper-clad feet rasped along the surface. The two robots made almost no sound at all.

We walked for more time and through more space than should have been possible. The schematics they gave us must have been very, very faked. I figured we were on the outside of the regular living quarters and labs and classrooms, in areas that were almost always used for water engineering.

If the life here were dumped—right now—into the oceans of Earth, it would die. And if it didn't, if by some strange miracle of engineering it survived, it would almost surely add new damage to the oceans. Key species we'd been nursing would be destroyed, ecological niches overrun.

I shivered, cold and frightened and angry. A shadow caused me to look up. A shark. Menacing and beautiful, meant to kill. On my left, a large water-blue fish with iridescent scales opened its mouth and scooped up two slower fish, who only realized their danger too late and failed to flash free of the bigger fish's jaw.

I took a deep breath, kept my eyes open, and swore to remain more alert than the small fish had.

Zoka broke her long silence. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. This is what a world should be like. *I want to study here.*"

Eliezer turned and smiled at her before he glanced at us. "It could be dangerous. Wait until we finish the tour and we see how our judges decide to evaluate us."

"This is the most dangerous thing I have ever seen," Sumot said, her certainty a match for Zoka's.

Everything about this station frightened me, but there was no denying the beauty and health of it, the audacity.

Dr. Tollingson glanced momentarily at each of us, trapping us, making sure we saw her look; a teacher's practiced demand for attention. "Now we'll go to the beginning. But first, a break and some food." After a short stop at a restroom, she offered water and crackers and fresh peaches on a plate. Sumot only took the water, but I ate a peach, savoring the sweet, sticky juice in spite of my nagging guilt.

The doctor led us to a room where a huge video wall dwarfed three rows of comfortable chairs. No fish. Only dead wall, a bare and slight light giving away that it could be brought to life. We were seated with the doctor and the robots between us, Sumot and I as far from each other as possible.

Dr. Tollingson stood in front of us, right at the door we had come through. "This will take three hours. It is important that you pay attention. We'll start with a real reef off of Belize, a part of the Belize barrier reef system. Our heritage was an early and failed attempt to save the reef you are about to see."

The overhead lights dimmed as the walls brightened, and the doctor's voice started into what sounded like a beloved and practiced lecture. Grainy footing showed healthy corals, sponges, and parrotfish. "We begin with a photo. The seas off of the coast of Belize were once bright and beautiful, but beginning in the early 2000's, they were slowly and inexorably damaged by storms. . . ." The coral that surrounded us on

the wall lost its color slowly. The number of species thinned, and then they disappeared one by one, until only a handful of fish could be seen. At first the changes were stutters as one photo gave way to another, one video to another, and then they became a more seamless record during the thirties, when the endless recording of all things started. The doctor's narration continued. "... by changes in the composition of the seas, by tourists, by sedimentation, and by efforts meant to save them."

She fell silent, and we watched as the coral whitened to bones and slumped to unrecognizable slurry covered over by slick green/brown algae. The last frame didn't show any life. The dull, colors seemed ineffably sad.

"This is the reef today. It has looked like that for years. We take new pictures every day, and every day we are reminded of what we are doing, and why. We brought up DNA from what was left, and even samples, all taken with grants and permission, and we used it to recreate the conditions of a reef after death."

"A fake version," Sumot said. "A lie."

"Perhaps," the doctor conceded. "But as far from a lie as we could make it. It took twenty years. It was not my project, thankfully. A team of three worked to bring the coral to life and then to destroy it, and we know from their writings that it was difficult."

"Can we talk to that team?" I asked.

The light from the screens behind her made her a silhouette, but it was possible to see her head shake no. "They have been dead for decades. This was done at the same time that DNasec was created, two different reactions to the same events, the same misguided experiments."

DNasec celebrated its fiftieth anniversary the year I signed up, and that was seven years ago. Five years in training, one in an internship, and now almost one with Sumot. A career that had suddenly turned into a thriller movie, missing only bonds on our arms as we sat and watched the enemy try to explain why they should be our friend.

The university's hubris sank slowly into my awareness. Fifty years. Fifty years of secrets, including secret funding. Fifty years of hiding from us.

The screen still showed the quiet of a dead reef, with small currents occasionally teasing bits of decay up from the ocean floor so that they danced like macabre brown and white ghosts.

The image shifted, but only to another view of another spot on the melted reef.

Dr. Tollingson spoke again. "What you see in front of you was created in a secret place, built to mirror the destroyed reefs that we just showed you. It is unchanged DNA, imported and grown and created in such a way that it would pass a DNasec inspection." She paused, perhaps making sure we heard the derision that spiced her voice. Or perhaps to put off one emotion and take another, since she changed to a more coherent and passionate tone. "Now, watch. The next hour will show you restoration. You will see it in time-lapse, but the video spans five years. During the video, you will see some things that were not in the aquarium you just walked through, and are not part of our final vision. Tools." Inexplicably, her next words were, "You might be horrified by these."

At first, nothing happened. Zoka's breath was calm, Sumot's labored and full of anger. I couldn't hear Eliezer's breath. A glance at him revealed a bowed head, like a monk in prayer.

A long, thin, worm-like being slithered onto the screen. Something like—but far bigger than—a jellyfish floated through, pulsing, pulling water through its body as a way of moving, and maybe of eating. Two more followed, slightly different. The water slowly cleared. More worms littered the floor of the sea, brown and ugly, and ever more visible as sand began to appear beneath them, clear and clean and as inviting as a handmade beach in a Hawaiian resort.

The worms split open, skin peeling back and curling away from their slick, slimed insides, color blooming from their blood.

New corals?

Fish came. Small fish at first, grey and green and eventually silver and gold. Blues and greens and yellows and rainbows followed, a few colors I have never seen in nature and hadn't even noticed in our aquarium walk. Teals and brilliant purples.

Scarps and rocks appeared in the distance as the water cleared. A small shark swam in front of the camera. A ray undulated in the far distance, and then another joined it. The picture froze on a sea full of creatures and ablaze with color. The world we had been given, and had destroyed.

Zoka spoke my question. "It is beautiful. But it looks like the old reefs. Why not create something completely different?"

Surely they knew their chances of succeeding with something that looked completely different were zero. Their chances with this were barely more than that. I waited to see how they would answer. Dr. Tollingson said, "This is what we set out to do."

Beside me, Eliezer shook himself, as if waking from a trance. "We aren't smart enough yet. We will be, some day. Even though we created it all, we based it on a success, or a framework if you prefer. Maybe we can do something entirely new next, but if we can, we'll do it somewhere beside Earth." He nodded at the screen, where fish darted and schooled and anemones waved clear and colored arms, where coral glowed in rainbow colors and sponges opened gaping and beautiful maws to a clear and crystal sea. "Your bees are not longer, or stronger, than Earth bees. They *are* more resilient."

"My bees are robots," Zoka said. "Those aren't robots."

"Of course not. But the design considerations aren't wholly different." He stood, waving his arms again, talking with his whole body. "This is moral, and right, and real. This is life."

Sumot said, "It is a plague of impurity."

"It is built from what we know and *made better*. The way we have made transportation and flight and living in space better. The way we have improved our own lives to give us each over a hundred years. This is only a beginning." He knelt then, knelt in front of Sumot like a supplicant. "We started with the ocean, because it is the closest ecosystem to a death spiral, and because it feeds all other ecosystems. If the ocean dies, humans die, at least on Earth." He was completely convinced. The only emotion that touched his face was pure belief; so pure it might be called faith. "Dr. Tollingson. Can you start the next video?" He glanced over his shoulder to see the screen turn back to the original browns and whites of death. Nodded. "This is a simulation of what happens on our current path."

Nothing for a while. More decay, until no sign of the coral remained, until the seafloor was as flat and empty as an abandoned highway. Small animals began to shiver in the muddy, silty ocean bottom, and then a few larger ones wandered into view. They looked reminiscent of lobsters, but with more legs and odd-shaped heads. Over time, the screens in front of us populated with beings far more different from us than the fish and corals of the created life.

"This is one simulation," Dr. Tollingson said. "Here are two more."

In one, the ocean froze, in another the fish all looked like eels, long and sonorous and eventually bright and with many tiny jointed hands. These were as removed from us as we were from the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"All of these are possible," Eliezer said. "No simulation that destroys what was our ecosystem recreates it. All are different. Some are strangely beautiful." A picture flashed behind us, land this time, everything long-legged and insect-like. Another one of huge animals, and another of what I could only call evolved cockroaches.

The screen returned to the existing reef off of Belize, the one true picture we had seen all day. "This is already dead," Eliezer said. "We can recreate something close to what we had, or we can stay up here in space and evolve ourselves while the Earth chooses a path, and hope that it's a path we can live inside of. Today's initial conditions could also create surfaces much like Venus or Mars."

Resist. Resist. I closed my eyes, and behind them, pictures of colorful fish and the tiny waving arms of corals lay in wait.

Dr. Tollingson grew wide-eyed. "We've been boarded."

"Good," Sumot said.

Henri must have been closer than I thought.

Eliezer glanced around as if evil DNAsec agents were about to leap through the door. If they did, I wondered if they'd recognize us in our paper suits.

"They will find us," Sumot said.

Zoka said, "But it will take time, right? What else were you going to show us?"

Eliezer looked at Sumot and then at me. "Did you hear us? The sea we know is already dead. Every trajectory, every model, results in a version we won't recognize. Which means every ecosystem we know is dead. Humans are dancing on a grave, arguing for nothing, and pointing weapons at us. At us. The very people who might yet save the planet."

He was so earnest, so certain of himself. *Resist*, I thought, *Resist*. Although the word was small inside of me, thin, maybe even foggy. *Resist*. . .

Sumot didn't seem to have any trouble resisting their imagery. "When they find us, we will tell them to destroy all that you have."

"This is one of many locations." Dr. Tollingson said. She waved toward the screens. "The Earth. That is everything in one basket. We learned from that mistake."

Meaning they had hidden even more than this from us? More aquariums, or more projects? Or was she bluffing?

The two robots took Sumot and me by the arms, and led us from the room. At the first possible opportunity, Sumot was taken one way and I another. Eliezer and Zoka went with me and Dr. Tollingson stayed with Sumot and her handler.

As we walked down the corridor, Eliezer asked, "Is it better to let the destruction we've started take its course than to fix it?"

I swallowed. My training screamed at me. Yes, yes, yes. "Humans aren't smart enough to fix nature, we have to step back."

He kept going, his whispers hot in my right ear, the robot cold on my left side, holding me next to it oh-so-firmly. "We are nature's only hope. We caused this, we have to fix it. If we don't act, who will? If no one acts, we all die. Maybe not humans, we can carry our destructive selves to the stars."

I didn't answer him. I was thinking too hard, trying to be like Sumot. Trying to resist.

Zoka spoke up, awe and discovery in her voice. "But if we can learn this—we can learn to fix the Earth, than maybe we won't do as much damage in other places."

Eliezer went on, "Yes. Yes, we can. If we can demonstrate our capability here, we can be responsible there. For example, if we could bring this knowledge, this ability to Mars, we could accelerate its livability by decades. In a hundred years, it could be lush."

The robot led us to a small room, and I prepared to be left there, locked in. Being alone and away from Eliezer's questions would feel good. There was so much to think about, to decide. To feel.

Eliezer went to the closet and pulled out my uniform, and the clothes Zoka had been wearing when they captured us. "Put these on," he said.

Getting out of the uncomfortably noisy paper suit sounded almost as good as being left alone. I changed. Zoka did, too, and we both brushed our teeth and hair and

washed our faces. She smiled at me, her eyes alight with excitement. "Isn't this wonderful? All this work. Being here. It's got to be historic."

I had to take a deep breath to keep from following her down that particular rabbit hole. We left our paper suits and paper shoes in the room. I felt better. Being clean helped, and wearing my own uniform helped even more. Now I had my motto embroidered on my back and the UN Biodiversity Protector logo on my pocket. They felt like shields.

As we walked, I listened to Eliezer and Zoka talk between themselves, like little gods. I'd never heard such enthusiastic arrogance.

The image of the healthy sea had been so beautiful I finally understood Joe's tears. But I didn't understand his choice yet. Had he sounded like these people? Had he been one of them?

He chose to betray this work, but why? I didn't know how to find out; we were sworn to protect our whistleblowers. Joe probably wasn't his name anyway. And I didn't have any contact information.

Eliezer was telling Zoka, "... the hardest part is the cleanup. We had to make species that would die naturally. We didn't want to have to kill them, because, well, we'd miss some. Eradication programs don't work reliably anyway. Better to build in their death from the beginning."

I asked him, "Isn't that still playing god?"

He hesitated, went serious. "There's ruthlessness in restoration as well as destruction. You of all people should know that."

When we stood over the dying parrots, Sumot told me to be ruthless. To kill them all, since they were all tainted. She had told me not to feel guilty, but I had cried myself to sleep for all of the nights between the destruct order and the day we flew away. Even now my mind skittered from thoughts about the Rising Jungle biome, from its gaudy advertisements and its ecotourism and its efficient, ruthless death.

I expected to be handed over to Henri in a corridor. Instead, they led me to a bright room full of lights and reporters, full of conversation, movement, and energy. Micro-cameras hovered near my face, and I waved them away. They moved back, but just out of easy range.

I searched for Sumot.

No sign of her. But in the back of the room, Henri. Sumot had said he did not like her. And now he was here, and I was here, and she wasn't here.

Dr. Tollingson was here, though, looking calm except for beads of sweat on her forehead and a tight jaw that twitched. She smiled broadly when she saw me, and gestured toward a chair that would make me the center of attention.

I walked up to her, looked up into her dark eyes, and demanded, "Where is Sumot?"

She glanced at Henri. "She went back to her keepers. You'll join her soon enough. But first, we have a press conference."

A jolt of anger braced me. How dare they? We controlled the press on investigations! I thought of Alin. "Where are our guards? From our ship?"

"Safe. They have been detained in comfort." She glanced at the chair. "Sit down. We want you to talk to the reporters, and your boss has said that you can take that role now."

I stared at Henri, who was too far away from me to ask him a direct question. He nodded. It was the barest of movements, but I had been taught to read micro-expressions. I nodded back, maybe an inch of brief acknowledgment.

"We have given the reporters the tour that we gave you."

My thoughts raced, confused. "When?"

"We just finished. They saw the movies and the simulations on the way in, and now they've seen the fish and the sharks and the anemones, and they understand how they were made, and why."

We were in space. Not next door to anything or anyone. The timing couldn't be accidental. No more accidental than Henri's arrival, anyway.

I sat, struggling to do away with my anger. It wasn't an investigator's tool, and I was on duty. I drew in more deep belly breaths with my eyes closed and started over. I was an investigator, and not a ball of confused anger. *Respect. Remember.* If Sumot wasn't here, I was going to have to be Sumot.

There were at least twenty people in the room. Seven had on the school's uniform, and then there was Eliezer and me. About five robots were probably guards, and two were badged as reporters. About seven human reporters. I recognized a tall, grey-haired man from the press conference after the Rising Jungle, when I had sat in the back and listened to Sumot answer questions. He was from one of the liberal presses that adored us and our mission. He was also by himself, with no one to talk to. So the other reporters might not be on our side.

A closer look identified three factions, which I suspected were for us, against us, and militant about being against us. Names and faces floated back up from briefings, and I realized I could identify four of them.

A man from the back took his hat off, and I recognized Joe. Our whistleblower. In what role?

Dr. Tollingson stood up, and the room slowly quieted.

"You asked to see the inspectors. We have brought you one. Please welcome Doctor Paulette Rain. She has been on the same tour that you were just on, and she watched the same videos you saw on the way in."

My hands shook. They must have called the reporters in right when the inspection was ordered.

Hands shot up. Dr. Tollingson picked a tall, redheaded woman who had been mildly against our mission in the past. "What do you think of a wholly created ecosystem?"

I hadn't had time to think about it. "It's illegal," I said. "It's what we were created to protect against."

"That's not news," the reporter said. "But what if they're right? What if they know how to save the world now, after we've destroyed it?"

"It's not dead yet," I snapped, trying to buy time. Maybe trying to buy the Earth time.

The reporter kept going, her face eager for a killing question. "*You* haven't saved the world yet. All of the protection in the world hasn't saved anything but the bald eagle and a few frogs. It's not enough."

It wasn't a question so I didn't answer. Advice from Sumot. Let them state whatever they want—their statements wouldn't end up in the news.

Dr. Tollingson allowed another reporter. "If you could destroy all of this, would you?"

There was the key question, and so fast. "The U.N. Biodiversity Protection rules demand it."

"Rules can be changed," the reporter said. "That wasn't my question, anyway. Is it your decision, and what will you do?"

I didn't know enough to answer. I glanced from Dr. Tollingson to Eliezer, to Joe.

Joe smiled sadly, but didn't offer any words.

The reporter pressed. "They've sent their research to us. They asked us to pick it apart. In general, we couldn't, not enough to argue with their primary conclusions that we act now or we fail to save the Earth. If it is your choice, what will you do?"

I remembered my dreams of parrots, and Sumot's straight back, and her words about ruthlessness. I remembered that she didn't have any trouble sleeping. I wanted

to please her, to be like her. I respected what I had signed up to do, and I needed to say the words that would make Sumot proud of me.

But I could not pull this trigger. The colorful anemones, the blue angelfish, the fish with the orange mouth that had gaped at Zoka. The shark. The reef before humans melted it. I took the mic and I sent a question back, looking directly at Joe as I spoke. "Why should we trust our technology when it is just that which damaged or destroyed so much of our ecosystems?"

I was pleased to see Joe stand up. I wasn't ceding my decision to him, or anyone. But he had started us on this path, and here he was at the end.

Tiny flying mics hovered just in front of and below his mouth. He didn't look at me, but at Dr. Tollingson. "I ran from here because you frightened me, and I frightened me. I'd been working as if I were a god for years, for almost all of my life. But then I made some mistakes and I lied about them. I realized how frail I am. I am not a god. So I left and came to you."

Beside me, Dr. Tollingson gasped.

Joe went on. "I watched the Rising Jungle die. I knew I could kill this work. I thought I wanted to."

"And now?" Dr. Tollingson demanded. "Do you still want death? How can you?"

Tears fell down Joe's face. "I went home." He kept his hands at his side, making no move to wipe the tears away. "Now I know that's another way to play god. Now I know that destruction is worse than creation."

"I would like you to answer my question," the reporter said to me. This was the third time.

I remembered the proud look on Sumot's face when they promoted me. I was in no position to change the rules of the U.N. That took a vote of nations.

Dr. Tollingson looked at me. The tiny lines around her eyes gave away her need, and the stillness in her face. A forced stillness, a personality that couldn't quite put her fate in my hands. "You are in a position to stay judgment."

This was the same question I had asked Sumot about the Rising Jungle. *Was there a way to buy time?* I took a deep breath and closed my eyes and searched for the images that came up. Schools of fish and Sumot's fear. She would let fear make her destroy all of this, like an avenging goddess of the government. She would have no regrets.

But I was not Sumot. I remembered the brilliant parrots rising away from us, the screech of the voices, the life in them.

I glanced at Henri, but he didn't move or offer any particular help. Coward.

I looked straight into the cameras. "I request that my superiors at the United Nations Bio-diversity Protection Force allow a three month stay of execution for the beings here. This will buy time to explore this solution."

I didn't need to read any micro-expressions to see the effect of my words. Joe's shoulders relaxed as he smiled. Dr. Tollingson continued to look neutral, although she couldn't quite keep the edges of her lips down. Eliezer looked so relieved you'd think it was his life I'd saved. Zoka screamed in happiness and hugged me, planting a kiss on my cheek. Her voice sounded like the happy screeches of the parrots. ○



Intimations of a Dead Immortality

In a world tamped down
to cimmerian shades,
streets and houses

thoroughly shrouded
by the shifting umbras
and penumbras of what

little light remains,
fields and forests
bound by darkness

beneath an indistinct
sky drained of color,
faint eidolons may

flicker across the
screen of your retina
with the herky-jerky

action of a silent film,
cast and crew dead,
trapped in repetitive

motion like the
forms that traipse
across your vision

testing the reality
of daylight wisdom,
stretching your mind

into the fearsome
realms of a senseless
half life that may

exist beyond death,
beckoning you to
join them in the

drear silence and
convulsive iteration
of their promenade.

—Bruce Boston

Jim Grimsley is a playwright and novelist who lives in Decatur, Georgia, and teaches at Emory University. His most recent book is a memoir, *How I Shed My Skin*, published by Algonquin Books in 2014. He is proud to have published several stories in *Asimov's*. In his first tale for us in eight years, the inhabitants of a rustic village on a distant planet discover the terrible consequences of . . .

THE GOD YEAR

Jim Grimsley

Close on the end of the festival of Slothe, the lotters in the capital drew the name of Muglet-on-Stumpings as the dwelling of the divine for the special year to come, a shocking bit of luck. God would abide in our village, and not in a bigger place. It were a fearful thing, the thought of a god to sit among us like an old stump, doing whatever a god does, which is mostly whatever it pleases. The lotters drew the name of our little hamlet and sent word to all the other temples, chapels, shrines, holy groves, and blessed mounds. Was places that had the news afore it reached us in Muglet, and one must wonder what they thought, since few enough had ever heard of our twist in the river, and them as had were not fond of our hospitality.

Fear came on us who lived in Muglet as we learned of the forewarning. A god year is a curse more than a blessing, as even the church folk say. As for me and how I heard it, I were in the rock spa when the news maven puffed into the hollow and said she had some tell to her, and I hollered for Mabus. Steam clouded from the rocks where the Newt flung the bucket of water. Though I bellowed at Mabus it was to wake him and not to call him from afar, for he had fell to sleep with his head near the lanthorn. “Mabus,” I hollered, “wake your arse and pay the tell if you want to hear of the new.”

He was in a decent mood, you see, so that I could make free with my tongue without fear of a beating.

“It’s two,” said the maven, picking at a scab on her lip. “I got two newses.”

Mabus’s belly trembled and rumbled a bit, and he pawed for his money pouch and threw three knuckle bones at her. She caught them neat. “Fair throw,” she said.

Mabus grunted. “You is paid.” His breath was a cloud of sour wine smell.

I said, “G’day, Selmene.”

“G’day, Rufous,” said the tell. Which my name is Rufous but I am in no way red or ginger. Odd it was to be a woman name of Rufous but my old Pa, blessed be his name beyond the grave, give me the name and I kept to it.

"Spit it," said Mabus.

"Well, first tell is never so much but that Pelly No's cow give birth to a two-tailed daughter."

"Never heared of cow with two tails." Mabus spat a gobber into the heated rocks, and we watched it sizzle for a bit. "Two-headed mebbe, but not two tails."

"Ya, well, I tell the news, not the glibberty gibber. I seen the calf nor would I say it otherwise."

"Second then. May it be worth the price."

"Ya, well." She puffed up her chest a bit, though it sagged a mite in the blouse, nipples on the level of her low ribs. Voluptuous nevertheless. I could see that she eyed Mabus as women are like to do, him being the handsome one. Then she told us about the lotters and the drawing, and I remember thinking, that's right, it's soon to be the year of god.

After she told, I sat there, and Mabus scratched his fanny, coarse nails scraping such as I could hear.

"World's turned upside down," said Selmene.

"We'll see," said Mabus. "Fair is as fair does. If God comes to this dump of a place, he'll pick me to sit into or nobody, that's the way I see it."

She tittered a bit. "Sure, and the god would like a handsome face, anybody would see the right in that."

He made a low grunting sound and paid her no more mind.

Selmene had no more to say after that and clambered out of the lodge. I laid back and tried to close my eyes, but Mabus grunted and kicked the Newt. Mabus said, "More water, you piece of slime. And more wood for the fire."

The Newt grunted and moved quick, eyes lowered, staying close to me.

"I told you, Mabus, don't kick at him like that."

Mabus grunted as the Newt poured from the jug, and the hot rocks hissed and sighed.

Rioters hurtled about in the capital after the lottery, but those folk will throw stones and break one another's heads if the weather is bad or the market is out of cheese. Fear of a god in Muglet brought back all the worst stories from years of incarnation in the past. Nothing good could come from having a god resident in such a backward place, or such was the yammering up and down the Land of Plenty.

By then the government had already postered the highways with a decree of sanction and isolation. Troops shut down our village behind a stone wall built with help from our neighbors from Nuxle, Clot, and Thigby. Local folk had always complained of the corvee as a burden, but the folks in our part of the country were willing enough to volunteer to put up stone between them and us. They were hoping a wall could keep the god safe and quiet in the Stumpings.

As for those of us in the village, we laid around drinking and conniving, same as before.

Last time there was a god year was in the young days of my maternal granda who ran the old bakery in Muglet. (Which the business was known as the plain bakery in those days, as there was no new one yet. Somebody opened a new bakery because my granda was constant drunk and only baked bread when he felt the urge. But everyone hereabouts still calls it the new bakery even though the roof has stove in on the old one, and the new baker has took to drink. Nowadays.)

My paternal granda Muckinna, last of my relatives to survive the pickling of his liver, remembered the god year of Cokely as clear as the stream in the yard, he said. He come to our shack years ago to lay about and sip the good corn brew, and nowadays he lives here. As the land and house was mine after the death of my kin, Mabus has

naught to say on the subject. I picked lice off Granda's head as he talked. I had already soaked his thin hair in cyprot seed. Now I crushed the lice and flicked them into the green stuff by the steps, where we was sitting, watching the Newt hoe the beans.

Mabus had come back from the drunker's with a jug, and we passed it here and there. Granda drew a deep swallow from the lip and said, "Lotters drew Cokely for the dwelling of the god that year. Big city, you know, but up nor. When the county and those noble fellows all followed to the dwelling, we was shut of them for a long time. Nice that was, no bursars and inspectors and pontiffs and what not. All them crawled up to Cokely fast as bugs to my scalp."

"No churching for a year," said I.

"Nice vacation from the pulpit," Granda agreed. "For most. Not a penny for the offering plate."

"Can't tithe on nothing," I said.

"But we don't have no proper church here anyhow," Granda said, and sighed. He had a claim to religion, being mammed by a lotter's god-daughter. "Still don't. The lotters will have to build one."

"You ever been to Cokely?"

"No. My mam was from near there, you know. But I never been."

He would flinch when I pinched his scalp instead of a nit. "You could set soap to your head now and again," I said.

"He never set soap to a single part of him, nasty old meat," says Mabus.

"Yer one to talk."

"Heh. You stink of the first turd you barely wiped from your ass, old man." Mabus was laying next us on the porch, and give a good grunt. He was smelling of his sweat pretty sour, so he had no room to make a comment on my granda like that, but after a second I forgive him. It was his looks give me the weakness for him. He was good looking even in his filth, a pretty one. Lucky I was to have him for a night's work, I thought, especially with Newt about to take the lickings that used to fall my way.

"And what do you know about theology?"

"Naught worth a snot happens in a church," Mabus said. "God year be buggered and skinned."

"Blasphemer."

"That time in Cokely, folks there come out rosy, but us? What was give to us? We was give crumbs from the crumb god."

"You wasn't even born, how would you know what was?"

"I heard you run on and on about it, time and again. You're always knotting up a story about the god year."

Granda would change the subject a bit after that, of course. "They like it when the god goes to some place up nor," said he. "They do a lot of worship in them parts."

"Why would the god come to Muglet when we don't even have a respectable church?" I was making a comment by means of a question.

The Newt looked at me for a bit, a relief from staring at Mabus, I guess.

"We never do any worship." Granda was eyeing the jug again, wanting a taste. "We never give the eye of the bird, nor a glass bead, nor clip the first clippings and lay them on the altar, nor any of the old ways."

The Newt fetched back to work after Mabus cuffed him across his crooked jaw. He shuffled off from the porch and scratched weeds out of the pole beans with that bit of blade we called a hoe. No proper tool was it, for Mabus was a cheap pair of balls. Meat for himself but never the rest of us more than twice a week. Drank the drunker's wine all day and fed himself stupid, lately. Grown fat at the belt line. He could hardly catch the Newt these days, when the lad took a mind to scuttle away from a kicking or a beating.

Poor Newt, I thought from time to time; and yet it was me he was saving, for Mabus had the kind of anger that looks for only one target at a time.

Mabus declared again and again the god would take his body and soul to inhabit, declaimed it drunk and sober, vertical and horizontal, at home and in public at the distillery yard, where most of the locals laid about and did their drinking, by way of a break from drinking at home. Though in those days even the drunkards complained of the noise and clatter of the army of workmen. The lotterers and the sacerdots were throwing up a new temple as fast as their builders could hammer a nail into a plank. Our quiet hamlet burst with unwanted life.

Most of us who lived there could only watch the progress and feel the press of the god onto our backsides. The lack of a church or shrine or temple never harmed a soul in our village, or so most would claim. The last church fell down before the god went to Cokely, the heap of wood and stone now covered under a mound of weed and leaf rot.

"Can we take it down after the god leaves?" asked one of the Butterbom sisters.

"I never wanted to live so close to a church," said the other Butterbom sister. "Gives me the shakes in the night to see the shadow of it rising up on that hill."

"If they put any more steeples on it, the bells will tip it over," said I.

"I would hate to have the ringing of all of them," said Sam Lanmaster. "Who will they get for it? Us? Hereabouts?"

"No, they'll bring in the special bell-ringer boys from Cokely," said the Butterbom woman. "The ones they clip in the balls area, if you know my meaning. I already heard the tell."

"The eunuchs," I said.

"The very word," she said, nodding.

"Well, that's something, anyway."

"Not good enough are we of the Stumpings to ring all them holy bells," said the elder Butterbom, and nodded her chin once. "But I still don't see why we have to leave it stand there after the god year is done."

"Who knows what will happen by then," I said.

Mabus grunted, heaving up from the ground, maybe ready to head for home. "I'll be the god around here by then, that's what," he said, flushed red as the sunset. "I'll bless you all with my miracles, you just watch."

"You ain't blessed me with anything in a while," said the younger Butterbom, leering at him.

"Wait your turn," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeves and trying to swagger a bit as he headed for the drunkery gate. "I'll get to all of you directly."

"Rude talk in front of your good wife," said Lanmaster, giving me a crooked smile.

Mabus gave me a bit of grunt, and for a moment I felt a shiver, for I had a fear of his hands.

"Why would a god want you anyways, Mabus?" asked Sam Lanmaster.

"'Cause he's so pretty," said the younger Butterbom. "Only he ain't as pretty as he used to be."

The Tenday commenced with the usual of fasting and wailing and whatnot. The tells come by every house and wrote careful who was obeying the Tenday ordinance, and none of us, nor even Mabus, wanted to risk the ecumenical punishments. He rent his garments and wailed a bit, like we was taught when was little, though Mabus's cough was up at the time due to the mold allergy he had, and his keening of grief was punctuated with rattling phlegm.

"You don't sound like a god will want you much," said Selmene, who was come to witness our lamentations, herself in a fine new shift of white wool, herself leaning

on a crook of wood carved in fancy scales and leafy bits give to her by the sacer-dotes.

"You'll see," said Mabus. "Let a rain wash this plant fuck from the air and I'll be good as new."

"Lots of folks believe it will be your Granda MucKinna who gets the god. Because he was blessed by the shadow of the god at Cokely." Selmene was looking at me. She spat in the dirt, rubbed at it with the end of her staff. "That's not tell, just gossip."

"Blessed by the shadow at Cokely? Such nitwits are you, to believe the gassy old stories he tells?"

"I don't make the rumors, I just move them about."

Mabus flung a dark leg off the porch and swatted at my granda, passed out by the door, not of liquor but of old age. "Them as wants an old man god are welcome to believe it."

I says, "Granda would make a good one."

"Drunk all day and stinking with farts."

"Not much better to be had anywhere hereabouts," I said.

Mabus glared at me with his nostrils all crusty, and made a low sound, and sneered so his teeth showed all round. He was mad nobody was chousing as to how it should be him who become the god and all. Such was his bafflement. The handsome ones can do nought but look in the mirror for all their days, and that's the plain fact. He picked up a rotting apple from the ground—they fell all round the house that time of year, always underfoot—and threw it hard at the Newt, who was drinking at the trough like an animal. For just a moment I thought he might throw it at me; but no. The apple caught Newt in the side and the poor little thing made an *oof* sound and looked at us, eyes mild and lazy and full of misery. There was no more unhappy creature in our world than he. The thought come to me very clear.

In that moment I understood, and thought to myself, oh. That's what the god will do, all right. No doubt about it.

At the same time Mabus was watching the poor slug, and I swear I saw the same moment of recognition in Mabus. "Great god of pig fuck," he said, and stomped once in the mud, and then did something I had never seen him do before. He covered his face with his hands.

I turned away, wishing he should not catch me staring at such a time. The god could pick the Newt, all right. Then there would be hell to pay.

That night Mabus bade me change Newt's bedding for the first time since autumn. Such was the manner of his change of heart, to give me orders and see me do the work. Mabus himself was gruff but never once that evening did he cuff nor kick the Newt. I was to bring the boy to the table for dinner. That was the next change. The child might as well eat with the rest of us. For Newt had always et on the porch with the dogs afore, because of Mabus not wanting the sight of him to spoil the taste of the victuals.

This give me a shiver, it did. For such a change might mean anything.

He were not a sightful thing, were Newt. He had a clubbed foot and legs too weak to hold him aloft, so that he scuttled along the dirt like a rodent or a creepycrawl. Whose child was he? You could have asked a dozen of us and gotten twice that many answers, but most agreed he belonged to Mabus. Some said he was got from one of the swamp clans twixt Clot and Thigby, or that he was a mix of elf and human. Another said he was a witch-cursed creature down from the old forest country where the witches live. All we knew of Newt was that he scuttled into the yard one day, hopeless and twisted at the edge of the trees, half-starved and fearful, yet refusing to run even when we flung dirt to make him go. Ever since, he hung around the hollow to stare at Mabus and do whatever Mabus set him to do. He had been about our house for years on years,

ever since Granda started to feed him scraps from the table, out in the yard. But even though Granda fed him, and me as clothed him in my hand-me-downs, we were hardly alive in Newt's world. Mabus was the god of Newt's life, and no matter how many kicks and cuffs he received from his divine, he never gave a sign that he noticed, except to flinch a bit at the sudden move of Mabus's hand. Such was Newt's love, endless and unquestioning, more like a dog than a child. More like a son, maybe.

So Mabus had decided to show him a drop of kindness. If the coming of God had done that much good, it was already a wonder.

In our country we scrape and bow to a god for every season, every month, every day. There is a god of the town, the house, the room, the table, the lamp, the eating sticks, the saucer, the cup. The god of skeletons is different from the god of bones. The deity who oversees fingers and the one who governs hands are distinct. Only by blending do the gods make the world. The god of days merges into the god of weeks and months and years. The god of bones and the god of fingers combine with the god of hands, the god of bodies, all the other gods of life, and people are made. Wherever two gods intersect, another god may arise. One god stands for all the gods we do not know yet, and some folk pray and bring offerings to her. There is even a god who claims there are no other gods, only him, though even his followers laugh at his nonsense. There are fools enough to honor them, a few for each god we know, and another set devoted to the gods who are unknown; but alongside the religious are those shiftless ones like us in Muglet who could barely be said to worship at all.

The god in Cokely was one of the good ones, Marm. She blessed the poor and made them rich, judged the rich and made them poor, founded some hospitals, cured some illness, resurrected some dead, and let it go at that. Marm is the god of sunsets and warm sands and breezes and the smell of flowers. A year of Marm was a year of good weather, easy work, and steady trade.

North of Cokely is the wasteland where the god Fyn once come to live among the people, being the god of fury, incest, piercing headaches, and painful sores; once he arrived, neither prayer nor sacrifice would move him. That country is called Fyn's Hearth now, and nothing grows there, nor do rains fall, nor rivers run. Nary a tree grows. The wind blows up storms of dust, and fires smolder that can never be put out. He burnt all the churches, temples, and synagogues, killed all the priests and followers and pilgrims; he stayed for a year alone in his wilderness and no one dared go closer, once he had smote down all the people. This is what we remember, anyway. He spared the rest of us, but only because he feared the other gods, or so say the preachers. If he could he would have wiped away Queen and country from sea to sea.

They crave to come among us, the gods do, to be flesh, to sit in the wind and taste the air, to bathe in water, to drink good liquor and touch warm skin. All of eternity, it seems, ain't quite enough. They long for something more particular.

"Why don't they just come here and stay?" I knew the story of Slothe's Door, but it never made sense to me that the gods could not open a door if they wanted. I was talking to my granda while we shelled peas into a bowl. The late winter peas had come off pretty and full, and I would pickle them to serve with stinkfish for feasting grub. In our creek the stinkfish were running pretty steady, and we had enough to eat that time of year.

Pelly No had come abroad to tell the world more about the miraculous calf of two tails. She had given us the whole saga of its birth when she set herself down at our hearth, but we wore that story out a while back, and anyway she had not brought the calf. Anything with two tails was remarkable when you saw it, but when it was down the road a ways, it was mostly still a rumor. I was short of calling her a liar about it, as why would a person lie about a thing like that? But I was close.

It was Pelly No who answered my question about the gods. "They have a contract with one another, they do," Pelly said. "The gods can only come here one at a time. It's their agreement."

Granda was nodding with his fingers stroking his chin, a pose he thought made him look wise. I had heard him say so often enough. His cunning look, he called it.

"I heard people tell that," Mabus agreed. "Back when I used to go to church. A bargain the gods made, that was the sermon."

Pelly No snorted and wiped her nose with a rag of cloth. She had big moles on her face, a constellation of them, rounded like little burial cairns. "You never went to no church. Ain't been no church here since the ecumenical fell down."

"My mam and me used to walk over to Nuxle."

"Oh, hear it come," said Granda. "He went to an ecumenical oncet upon a time and now he's a reverend."

Mabus gave a good frown, the kind that he sometimes followed with a fist the size of a ham. "My mam liked a spell of preaching now and again. Give her a reason to stay sober for a morning or two."

"So do I. A bit of church is good for a body." Pelly No was retying her bonnet, the strop disappearing into a crease of her chin. There was a gray bit of ruff framing her face, and it flopped this way and that when she moved. "Keeps a person mindful of the wondrous nature of it all."

Mabus spat into the bucket and made it ring.

"Them people in Nuxle is crazy for that church," said Granda, nodding wisely.

Pelly had a blissful look. "So is Mabus, turns out."

"Well, it's true as I heard of the contract is all." Upon being contradicted, and despite his sour look, Mabus had never so much as flushed red nor puffed his cheeks, remarkable calm. "I'm not no pew sitter. But that was how I learnt about the good gods and all that uselessness, walking over to Nuxle with my mam now and again."

"Taint useless. Look a here at us, with one of the good gods about to come for a visit."

"Or one of the bad ones." I had not stirred in a spell and everybody turned to look. People were always apt to forget I was around since I was but Mabus's wife, and he had a good number of women in the Stumpings. I made a point of speaking ever so often, but the habit of me never appeared to set in.

Still, I had said something this time that raised the tide of unsettlement in the room, with Pelly fidgeting on the three-leg stool, and Granda fastening his britches; which, he spent a good part of every day either unfastening them or fastening them back, his belly bulging against the button.

"We'll know soon enough," said Mabus, his voice mild as milk, watching Newt in the corner, who sat by the fire gnawing at a corn cob from supper.

"I suppose."

"It's soon, ain't it?" asked Granda. "Then the god could come any day."

Pelly nodded. "Soon as they get the roof on the new church. The big time popes and bishops and such will be here by then. For the deliverance."

"You going?" asked Granda.

"Oh, ya, never would I miss it." Pelly spit into the pot, faro leaf juice at the corner of her mouth. She plucked a new chew of the plug of faro, tucked it under her tongue, and sat back with a sigh. "I got me a spot picked out on the drunkery yard."

Mabus snorted. "From what I hear half the town will be there with you, you mark my word."

"You going to keep watch?"

Mabus grimaced, drawing a deep sip of liquor from the jug. "I might. Would be nice if the useless preachers could tell us the very day. Never seen a god come down before. Might be worth it."

"You think they really are gods?" I asked.

"Don't start this shit again," Mabus said, giving me a long warning look.

In my foolishness I persisted, maybe due to the drink. "It's just a question. Everybody wonders, don't they?"

"I said I want no talk like that."

"They could be otherworlders. They could be dead ones come back with a purpose. They could be the great machines gone loose and wild."

Mabus made a low sound and gave a hard, dark look at me, and like a flash his hand whacked and walloped across my face. How many times he hit me I could never say. I was stunned, my skin stinging, and blinked at him in what must have been a stupid way. He had hit me harder but not for a while. He was breathing just the same as before. "I told you to leave off that shit in my house."

Though it was my house according to law, I said never more a word.

Newt watched me from his tattered bedding along the wall. I was the one to get hit this time, I could see the relief on his pitiful face.

"What do you think, you can sit here and blaspheme the gods with one of them coming to live here?" He was so close I could smell the beer on his breath.

I rubbed at my jaw.

Pelly No was plucking at her skirt a bit, pretending not to have seen.

For he had always bullied me, Mabus had, when he was of the mind. Most times he would stop at one good lick, if it was me he was hitting, and that night he held to the rule, likely because Pelly was in the house. Later in the dark he might turn to me and act gruff, which was as far as he could move toward tender, and by then the burn on my cheek might have eased off, and I might let him handle me in the dark. He would handle me if he liked, whether I were willing or no. This cycle was nothing special or new. A couple in Muglet consisted of the one who gave out the licks and the one who received them.

As I never had good sense, after a spell of uncomfot I said, plain and loud, "Because, you know, I don't know why they should be gods anyways, they don't act like proper gods, do they? People talk about it, I'm not the only one."

Mabus glared at me again, and I ducked my head and clamped my mouth shut.

Granda, by way of a change of subject, took a quick deep breath. "Well, we'll have us a church anyways. What do you think that will do to the local character?"

Mabus snorted and spit at the edge of the hearth. Pelly chuckled with a nervous breath and crossed her arms across her bosom. "Will look nice next to the Boomyard," she said, giving the name of the distiller's place. "We can lay out on the church steps drunk and sing 'Pretty Green Polly' of a holy day."

"I think it will improve the place," Granda said. "The people of character will start to move here and religion will overcome us all."

"You think that, do you?" Mabus spoke in a low growl, a prolonged note of warning.

"Can't hurt now, can it?"

"Would be the ruination of us all." As Pelly spoke, she nodded agreement with herself. "Virtue come upon the Stumpings."

"Depends on what god sets down among us," Mabus said, and glared at Newt again; Mabus's eyes had gone to hard points, as if he was afeared again.

Next day he walked the Newt over to Nuxle and had Ma Emmy the seamstress fit him for clothes. Such an event fell on our little house like a thunderclap, and neither Granda nor I dared to utter a word about the change. Two suits of the everyday and one good enough for churching. This was the first inkling we had that Mabus would walk the twisted child to church the next Tenday morning. One shock following another.

Many a Muglite was walking to Nuxle for the worship that last day before the incarnation, even Granda and me, all of us hoping to hedge our bets. The day of the god drew closer, even as the wall around the village grew taller. So many priests and preachers had descended on us that their robes and sashes and whatnot flashed like rainbows.

The sight of the Newt in good woolen drawers and cotton trousers had me perplexed. I had a certainty that the unlikely kindness of Mabus to the wee and twisted urchin spelled out a disaster for me. As sure as Mabus could not kick the Newt he would hurl his boot into my backside more and more; this had always been the case before the wee one hauled himself into the clearing near our house, that first day he come to us, not so long ago as all that. From that day on Mabus had a special hatred for the child. For that reason I never doubted the blood that connected them, father and son. There was some bond fixed between them, and nothing good in the connection, only a kind of obsession. When Mabus had his eye upon the Newt, there was naught else he would consider.

Such a hatred could only come of the mother, I thought, though I had learnt by then to keep my thoughts to myself. Some hatred for the mother, whatever she might be.

In the church in Nuxle, among the prosperous villagers who had rebuilt their stone church only a few seasons before, we sat on the ground among the shrubs and flowers, slapping at biteybugs and listening to the preachers, the priests, the choir and the chant. We offered prayer to the One God, the Twenty-One Gods, the Ten Thousand Divines, the Two Million Holies, and All the Others. We covered all the possibilities when we prayed, and in that fragrant, itchy sanctuary I understood it was for the fear of the gods that we sat here, lest they be angry when they manifested among us. All must receive their due, according to their ranks and orders.

We made an offering to the Door made by Slothe, the one through which the god would arrive. On the wall of the church stood the idol of Slothe, first among clerics, long dead, almost as holy as a god; for she it was who made the deal to keep the Door closed, and woe be unto us if it was ever opened and all the gods made themselves manifest at once. For the offering I gave three glass beads, color of azure. Granda gave two in the hue of fish-pink. The clerics and the whatnot would add these to the bead curtain that hung over the altar, the symbol of the Door, shimmering a bit in the breeze as we watched.

Mabus and Newt, who were sitting ahead of us in the shuffling crowd, added offerings of their own. Mabus sprung of a family considerable in comparison to Granda and me, and even if we was bound in manner and body, as they say, he kept separate from us in the church. Nor did I take it ill of him, no more than a mite, anyway. It were a relief to sit apart from him and his brooding, and a wonder to watch that he struck up such a public fondness for his twisted child.

"Praise be to all the gods," said the clerics, attempting unison and mostly managing to achieve it. "They are good as we are good and they are bad as we are bad. Blessed are their many names, too numerous to spell or list. Amen."

Upon which prayer the Prime of the Lotters, in the village as part of the preparation for the god year, delivered us the sermon about the coming of the god.

"Woe unto the country, she said, woe and lamentations and more, for when the god comes it shall come suddenly, a few scant days from now, and its manifestation will be with a vast shout that is heard by all, and its presence shall fill the vessel of its choosing without mercy. It shall sit among our people as the wolf among sheep, and even its gentle deeds shall shake us and bend us, hurl us upward and cast us down. It shall lust for all the joys of the body and visit upon those near it such curses and blessings as it chooses, and there is naught that we can do, for against the coming of the god in the god year the Door can never be closed. For if we close the Door on the

one god, that portal shall fail utterly, and all the gods will come through it at once, and poor humankind, utterly bereft, will be swept away into the ocean of chaos.

"Woe be unto the person who denies the power of the Door, for we ourselves shall cast that miserable unbeliever beyond the Door, into the Land of the Valley of the Place of the Dwelling of All the Gods, and may none of them have mercy upon that sad soul, who will suffer of their torment forever and ever and a day, Amen."

At the end the cleric added: "Woe shall be unto Muglet-upon-Stumpings, where the True God will rest among our neighbors, for that place will be changed and even accursed among us all, even more than it is now, sad foul village that it is, with never a church to its name."

Those of us from Muglet were rustling and fidgeting at feeling the finger of the Prime upon us. I wished for a drink, the thirst upon me.

After the walk home to our landstead, I set out a meal of corncake and gravy, roasted turnip and orsterwing, from a brace of orster caught by my Granda using the birdnet. These were tender and tasty, roasted in the coals of the hearth while we trod to and from Nuxle in the search of spiritual mush.

"Good sermon it were," said Granda, smacking his lips on the oily meat.

Mabus grunted, and Newt, sitting at table on a stool, made a mewling sound in imitation. His pocked face glistened with orster and gravy spots, and he gazed furtively at Mabus, eyes full of wonder but at the same time wary, I could see, mapping every movement of Mabus's hands.

"Were the usual blather and bother," said Mabus, wiping his mouth with his sleeve; and then, in a more considered tone, he spoke with an eye on the child beside him. "Though Newt were a well behaved 'un, as all could see."

"Indeed, the little one were scarce a bother in the sanctuary," Granda agreed.

"Are there more of the corncake?" Mabus asked, giving me a glare to fetch him more from the warming pan. Which I did, of natural, seeing the temper in his gaze.

"Were a good rain yesterday," Granda continued, his tone warming and soothing.

"Were a rain, indeed, and brought up the stickleweed through the whole garden," Mabus said, glaring at me again.

Newt had raised his head a bit at the sound of the word stickleweed.

To me, Mabus said, "You'll be on your knees among the garden today, hear me? You'll pull them weeds by sundown else they'll be a foot tall by morning. Hear me, do you?"

A moment of silence accompanied his fierce eye on me, and I swallowed. Granda gave a bit of harrumph and found a reason to scratch behind his ear. The kneeling in the mud of the garden rows had always been the work of the Newt since he had come among us. But I lowed my head a bit. I muttered, "Is a might of housework that I could be doing as well."

"You'll find the time for that when the weeding is done," said Mabus, and spit out a bone of the orster onto the straw that covered the floor.

"With no help, I'm guessing."

"What help do you need, worthless bag a bones? You want to set around here drunk on a churchday? Afore the many gods I swear you'll do as you're told or you'll know a better way due to the back of my hand." He spat out this while glaring, with his eyes gnarled out, and his hand clenched at the end of the table as if to restrain itself. I could almost feel the hard edge of it on my face.

The Newt was watching, as wan as if the shouting were at him, poor tiny thing. Yet I could not help but feel a flash of hate for him at the moment, since now it was I getting his licks, or the threat of them, and doing his work, all out of the fear of my husband.

So it was I spent the hours of the heat on my knees in the garden, hands wrapped in rag, wrenching the sharp-leaved stickleweed out of the muddy ground. Sweat

poured from my skin and my back throbbed with the ache. Wanting a tankard of the good beer I was, and watching the others as they laid on the porch of the house, Mabus and my Granda and the Newt, taking their leisure on church day. Sure it was the stickleweed would have swallowed the peas and okrey. But I felt the change of my position in the world.

Once in the afternoon the Newt crept in his sideways squat to the edge of the garden and gave me the long eye. His face were a twist of features and hard to read of any feeling, but for a moment I felt him sorry at the sight of me, hands oozing blood from the hundred cuts of the weed. Anger flooded me and I hissed to him, "Go on with you. Go back to yer shady layabout. Afore your pa sees me and gives me a kick for your sake."

Silent, bowing his head a bit, perhaps from the weight of it on his scrawny neck, he shuffled to the cool dark of the house again and left me to my work.

By now the wall around our village had reached its height and outside pilgrims had flocked by the thousands and tens of thousands to await the incarnation. They camped in tent cities and listened to the endless sermons of the clerics and divines, all pointing the finger at the wall and inviting the judgment of one god or another on us poor folk within. Hoping, they were, that the god who appeared would confine itself to the land within the Stumpings; a vain hope, if history were any means of prediction.

In Muglet proper had come a pitch of belated and unwelcome stirring, crowds of strangers afoot, every street and alley cramped with unfamiliars, all our neighbors with mouths agape at the invasion from the world abroad. Someone was paving the streets with flat stones to trouble the good mud beneath, for the sake of the pedestrians, as we heard, "pedestrian" being a name for those who walk, when we never knew the act of walking to deserve such a high-flown word. The new temple gleamed, regular and perfect of form, vulgar and new, built in the style of the Twenty-One Gods, who are known for their general good temper. A slate roof crowned the stately columns, the only such roof in all of the Stumpings. From far and without had come the builders, the finishers, the gawkers and gapers, the hordes of the clerical, the body of whom had erected an inn, a hostel, and a dormitory along the muddy lanes leading from the village to the outer world. One hardly knew the place any more. Some god had already set a hand among us.

Those of us in the Boomyard were aghast at the changes, and as the time of the incarnation grew near—a day that could be predicted in general but never in particular—we swore at the fuss and bother of it all.

"So it will come with a clap of thunder and a surge of fire out of the ground," says Granda, belching the gas of his ale and wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

"And a grand spray of spit," added Pelly No.

"And a fine round of farts brought on by my good mam's pot of boiled greens," said Grunus the beermaker, holding a bucket of beer from which Mabus filled his mug.

The Newt, so drunk he glowed with gold, had faded beside him on the ground under the bliss of the beer, his first.

"Says the grand Primus, we could have the good god among us any time now," Pelly declared. "Many have been the signs."

"If you mention that damned two-tailed calf of yourn again I'll tie the blousings around your head." Mabus drew back a bit at the sound of his own voice.

"You're of a bad temper today," said Granda.

Mabus gestured to me. "Who wouldna be, with that ill-faced wench of a wife fouling the good custard for my dinner." He held his beer as if he was like to fling it at me. Already my face was bruised from a cuff of the night before, after he threw my custard to the straw; later in bed I made too much noise during the fornication and

earned a nice wallop to the eye. So here today, grateful to be allowed the trip to the drunkery, I held as still as I could.

Pelly pretended not to notice, knowing Mabus's temper as well as any.

"When the god takes me for his body, I'll have no more of a sullen bitch for a wife." Mabus turned the tankard down his throat again and poured. Newt had curled against him, but still I could see the mistrust in his way of sitting, ready to dodge a blow he feared would come, no matter how golden he might feel.

From close at hand and without so much as a warning, a crescendo of horns and flutes erupted, so fierce it gave me to start, and poor Newt, frightened out of his wits I suppose, lost his water against Mabus along the trousers. Piss spread down the grimy wool while Newt, too drunk to move, fumbled his poor fists into the ground to try to gain some traction. His face washed over with pure terror.

Mabus felt the warm on his leg and looked down. At first he blinked and then he changed. Such was the rage on his face that he said nothing at all but only showed a face darkened with blood, and I nearly snatched the child away from his side. Newt set to mewling, still too drunk to find purchase and flee. Then, almost at the same instant, Mabus looked at me and lunged.

I felt the blows on my face as acts and not as hurt, as if I had detached from my body; and then followed the paen of trumpets and drums and a terrible voice shouted, "It is the god, it is the god, it is She Who Avenges All," and a light poured around us such as was awful to the eye. Still Mabus pounded at my face with his fist, not yet aware that the god had come, turning the wrath of the moment onto me, his britches smelling of piss and his face a blossom of rage.

From the sky, from the Door, a voice boomed across the countryside. "So comes Averah, she of the Ten Thousand, and mortals shall weep."

Around us people cried her name, this god of whom I had never heard. Such confusion was in me that I wondered why it was that people gaped at me so, figuring only that they enjoyed to watch Mabus give me a good licking for nothing I had done.

So again the sky opened, and the heavens roared down, and into my body flooded the everlasting, the torrent of Averah, angry and full of malice, and the last vision I had that was my own, unfiltered through the mind of the god, was Mabus, gaping at me with a terror that would never end.

Around me, in the drunkery and all along the village green, people were kneeling. At my feet poor Newt was crying and grasping for my feet, and enough of me remained that I reached down and took him by the hand, made a kind of wave through him that straightened and rightened all his body. By then I was dissolving, but I held onto myself long enough to see Mabus, scrambling to his feet, running for his life, and I marked him for the god, who smiled inside me, stretching out the fullness of herself in his direction, so that he ran not long enough or far enough. And so the thing was done. She who avenges all.

So it was the god come down to Muglet, and I was she, and Mabus my husband was first to pay the price. Afterward came the god year, and I was nevermore known among the good people of the world. ○

Jason Sanford <www.jasonsanford.com> grew up reading *Asimov's*, which his grandfather subscribed to in the 1980s. Jason still has several of his grandfather's issues with the original mailing tags attached, and figures this helps explain his love of short fiction. A Nebula Award finalist, the author's stories have been published in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Analog*, and many other places. In his latest tale, a government that exerts total dominance over its people finds itself with a . . .

DULLER'S PEACE

Jason Sanford

Serija knows what happens when she thinks the wrong thoughts—people die. When Serija's mind creeps across forbidden ideas like "I hate the nation," her mother dies. When Serija feels anger at the nation, her brother and father slip into death.

So now Serija stays happy happy and smiley smiles. Now she keeps her thoughts calm and loving even when she smells the burnt-orange scent of dust laughing at her. This is entirely proper, she believes, and what every twelve-year-old should do in these days of whispered screams and dulling pain.

"Serija?" her grandfather asks. "Serija? Are you even listening?"

Serija sits with her grandfather on the cement steps in front of his home. Her grandfather worked all day in his rice fields and now rests—exhausted—as the mud on his clothes slowly dries into cracked maps of imaginary lands.

Before them stretch the family's fields, newly flooded with finger-shoots of gened rice poking through the mirrored ripples. Beyond the fields rise the hills and mountains that hem in this valley. Sometimes Serija pretends the high peaks are alive—that their shrieking winds are actually whispered promises to conceal her valley from the outside world. She knows the mountains do this simply to keep her happy and safe.

"I'm listening, Grandfather," she says.

"Doesn't seem like you are."

Serija smiles again, which she knows troubles her grandfather. But it's not safe to do anything but smile. To reassure her grandfather, Serija leans over and hugs him.

They are still sitting there minutes later when a mother and child pass by the house on their way to the village market. The mother holds the little child's hand as their footsteps raise a trail of dust from the dirt road.

The dust's burning-orange scent jumps through Serija's mind. Before she can stop herself, Serija remembers holding her own mother's hand as they walked home from that final political rally in the capital city. Serija had felt so proud at the rally, her

face giving to true smiles as her mother stood in front of thousands of people and announced that even the death of her son and husband wouldn't silence her.

"Let the nation feel your anger," her mother had yelled to the cheering crowds. "Let the nation know your every thought is hatred for what they've done to our people!"

But after the rally, as they walked down a street near their apartment, her mother gasped and fell to the ground. Passersby screamed and ran away, afraid they'd be killed for being sympathetic or helpful.

Serija's mother shivered and gagged and squeezed Serija's hand tight as the smell of oranges burned around them. Her mother tried to say something, but words refused to slip past her lips. And then the shivering stopped and her mother lay on the street as nothing more than dead.

Now, as Serija watches the mother and child walk before her, she remembers prying her hand from her mother's vice-clenched grip. The mother and child also kick up dust as they walk, forcing Serija to think of the tiny motes that killed her mother.

In fact, the motes surround Serija even now. The air she breathes is filled with their technology. Her blood flows to their systems as they monitor her every thought. If she isn't careful, she'll think a wrong thought, and the motes will kill her grandfather for doing nothing more than sitting beside her.

Serija jumps up in panic, desperate to run for safety. But where is safety when the motes are everywhere? She steps backward and tumbles to the dry ground, raising a cloud of dust. She smells more burnt oranges and screams, brushing the dust and motes off her clothes but only stirring them up even more.

"Serija," her grandfather yells, pulling her into his arms. "Look at me, Serija. It's okay. Everything is okay."

Serija stares at her grandfather's face, puzzled for a moment because she can't recognize him. Then the memories wash away, and she knows him again and cries.

The mother and child walking along the dirt road continue on, polite enough to pretend they haven't witnessed Serija's outburst.

That night Serija can't eat the dinner her grandfather cooks—she keeps imagining the motes mixing into every bite of rice. Her grandfather nods understandingly and fixes a quick bowl of soup. "The boiling destroys the motes," he says. "Back when I worked in nano design, I used high temperatures to destroy their systems."

Serija isn't sure that's true, but loves her grandfather for making the effort to craft such a beautiful lie. She sips at the soup before walking to her room and slipping into bed.

She sleeps a little that evening but wakes well before midnight. From the front of the house she hears whispered voices. She'd forgotten that tonight is when her grandfather's friends visit each week for drinks and conversation.

"How's she doing?" one voice whispers. Serija recognizes the voice as Uncle Karin, her grandfather's younger brother from the other side of the village.

"Not good," her grandfather says. "Everything sets off her memories."

"Flashbacks," a voice she doesn't recognize mutters.

"No, not flashbacks," her grandfather says angrily. "How the hell can they be flashbacks when the nation keeps doing this shit to us. The motes are probably in our whiskey right now."

Someone coughs as if they'd swallowed wrong while Uncle Karin urges her grandfather to be quiet. "They'll hear," he warns.

"Doesn't matter if they hear," her grandfather states. "Their motes are everywhere. They're in us right now, reporting our thoughts and emotions before we can even comprehend them." But as if heeding Uncle Karin's words her grandfather lapses into silence.

"She's only a child," Uncle Karin whispers. "Curse the nation for this. Curse them all."

The other men shush Uncle Karin while Serija's hands shake at hearing such wrongness. *I didn't hear that*, she thinks. *I didn't. I love the nation. I love the nation.*

Serija keeps repeating that thought until, exhausted, she finally forgets to stay awake.

Serija's grandfather has told her many times to avoid remembering too much—that the motes can only probe your memories when you're actually remembering.

But when she sleeps it's hard to not remember how things used to be.

So yet again Serija dreams of the city, just as she does most nights. Yet again she hides in her family's empty apartment after they die, the weeks passing slowly—and alone—until her food runs out. The red-painted front door mocks her because she fears opening it. The framed pictures of her mother and father and brother eye her constantly as if asking what life would have been like if Serija's evil thoughts hadn't killed them.

When hunger finally drives Serija out of the apartment, she wanders the neighborhood in a daze begging for help. People twist in horror from her thin face, or look through her as if she's a mere ghost or afterimage. A few curse her in whispered tones, wanting to be sure the nation knows of their hatred for this little girl.

To survive Serija eats leftover food she finds in the trash. To pass the time she watches video screens through restaurant windows—wondering how the rest of the world can let such pain happen here—or stares at the bouncing balls in the toy store and remembers how her mother once promised to buy her one.

Then one day her grandfather arrives. He stands in the open doorway of her empty apartment holding a perfumed handkerchief before his nose to block the smell of decayed trash and excrement. He turns from the apartment and kicks in the door across the hall, then kicks in the other doors on the floor, screaming at the neighbors that they are scum. That they are simply evil.

"How could you not help a starving child?" he yells. "The nation is laughing at you for being too scared to even feed a hungry child!"

The neighbors recognize her grandfather and know of his fabled reputation. How he'd been their land's most famed design engineer before giving that up to fight the nation. How he would still be fighting if the nation's motes hadn't ended the war.

Fearing that the nation will punish them for being near Serija's grandfather, the neighbors beg him to go away. Instead, he hits them and curses them until—exhausting his anger—he picks up Serija and carries her from the city to his home village.

When Serija wakes from her dream it is still nighttime. She smiles, remembering how her grandfather saved her and punished those nasty neighbors.

Then, realizing that such thoughts are wrong, she whispers her love for the nation and covers her face with her pillow so the dark room disappears into the soft crush of an even smaller darkness.

In the morning the satellite school is in session, so Serija packs a lunch and walks down the dirt road. Her grandfather offers to walk with her, but she says she'll be fine.

And she is, until she sees the patrol.

She's walking with several classmates when the patrol approaches from the opposite direction. There are three of them, nation soldiers, all sealed in battle gear from their boots to their helmets and masks. The teacher in the satellite school once said the helmets and masks and sealed suits protect the soldiers from being hurt, but Serija has heard a different truth from the other villagers. That the nation soldiers seal themselves in because they don't want to breathe the motes.

The soldiers don't want their own nation knowing what they think.

No, Serija thinks, immediately dismissing the thought. *La la la. I love the nation. I love the nation's soldiers.*

"It's the whole garrison," a boy next to Serija whispers. Like most of the village kids, he wears a scarf wrapped across his mouth and nose. The villagers believe scarves keep out most of the motes. But Serija doesn't bother wearing one—her grandfather told her only high-tech barriers stop the microscopic machines.

This can't be all the soldiers in the valley, Serija thinks. "There are only three soldiers," she whispers.

"That's the entire garrison."

Serija glances across the valley at the firebase, which is built on a large hill. The base controls this valley and the nearby mountains.

"There used to be hundreds of soldiers there," the kid says. "And even more drones and remotes. But now, with the motes, they only need three soldiers to watch over us."

As the soldiers step closer, their black-mirror facemasks reflect back distorted images of the kids. Serija and her classmates bunch together, trying not to be afraid.

"I love the nation," Serija croaks, her voice barely a whisper. Then louder. "I love the nation!"

The other kids repeat Serija's words until they're chanting their love with each step they take. One of the soldiers points a scanner at the kids, which Serija has heard compares the words and actions of people with their mote-detected thoughts. *I love the nation*, Serija thinks, praying the motes will transmit this truth to the soldiers.

One of the soldiers nods a faceless mask at the kids and gives them a thumbs up.

Serija and her classmates hurry down the road to the school, not one of them looking back to see where the soldiers are going.

The satellite school sits in the village's old meeting hall, the building's cinderblock walls rough and uneven from decades of cement patches and peeling coats of paint. A bricked-over starburst on one wall shows where a missile hit during the early years of the war.

The only attempts at modernity in the hall are the receiver and projector bolted to the cracked fiberglass roof.

Once inside Serija breathes deeply, trying to forget her encounter with the soldiers. Serija's classmates play a game of hide and seek and ask her to join in, but Serija merely shakes her head and sits—smiling—at her desk. Serija knows that just because their teacher isn't here that doesn't mean they aren't being watched.

At the exact second school is supposed to start, the projector hums and the teacher appears before the class. The other kids scurry to their desks.

"Very nice, Serija," the hologram says. "It's always pleasing to see polite, attentive students like yourself."

For a moment Serija remembers her human teacher from when she lived in the city. That teacher once taught a fascinating lesson about data mining and analysis—about how it's difficult for the nation to track every thought people have every moment of every day, but that over time their algorithms still pick up on trends. That with enough watching, the algorithms can easily decide which people deserve closer attention.

Serija knows the village's holographic teacher is merely another expression of those same algorithms. She wonders if the teacher is praising her because Serija warrants attention, or because Serija no longer needs close monitoring.

The teacher frowns at Serija, who immediately smiles even harder and remembers how much she loves the nation. She wishes the teacher were physically here so she could hug its algorithm-driven form.

The teacher nods its approval to Serija as it begins the day's lesson.

That evening Serija and her grandfather are eating dinner when Uncle Karin bursts into their house with his son, Alani. "They want him!" Uncle Karin yells.

"What are you talking about?" Serija's grandfather asks.

"The soldiers came to our house this morning. They said Alani has a brain tumor."

Alani, who is only six, stands silently beside his father. Only the child's eyes are visible above the purple scarf wrapped around his lower face. But even without seeing more than Alani's eyes, Serija can tell the child is terrified. While Alani may not understand all of what his father is saying, he knows enough to be afraid.

Serija's grandfather nods at her to take care of Alani, so she leads him to her bedroom where he silently stares at the floor. When Serija tries to unwrap the scarf from his mouth and nose, Alani cries and pushes her away.

"What happened?" Serija hears her grandfather ask softly.

"You saw the soldiers this morning? They stopped by my house. They held a scanner near Alani's head and announced he had a tumor. But they already knew it was there. I know it!"

"La la la!" Serija sings, grabbing Alani's hands and twirling him into a silly dance to keep from hearing the conversation in the other room. But she still hears everything.

"Of course they knew," her grandfather says. "The damn motes probably gave him the tumor in the first place."

"Let's play hide and seek," Serija says, stopping the song and dance because it isn't keeping her from thinking wrong thoughts. Alani's eyes widen and he nods, excited. Serija looks around her tiny room—there's nowhere to hide, except under the blankets on her bed. She grabs the blankets and holds them up as she and Alani dive underneath.

"Who are we hiding from?" Alani asks.

"Everyone," Serija whispers. The words of her grandfather and Uncle Karin are now muffled. But she still understands far too clearly what they're talking about. *I love the nation*, she thinks, and hopes her attempt to think correctly and not listen to wrongness will protect Alani and her grandfather and Uncle Karin.

Despite being under the blanket, Serija hears Uncle Karin crying. When he finally stops, her grandfather asks what the soldiers offered him.

"They'll take us to their main base and treat him. For free. Then they'll return us safe and sound."

"That's what they always offer," her grandfather says. "Hearts and minds. They want to win our hearts and minds."

"I know. But what am I to do? Let Alani die? Like his mother?"

"Your wife was brave . . ."

"My wife listened to your damn advice and now she's dead."

Alani pulls the blanket from over his head to listen. Serija knows Alani's mother died several years ago of some strange cancer that spread throughout her body. Aware that Serija and Alani are listening, the men lower their voices and step outside the house.

When they come back inside an hour later, Serija is reading a picture book to Alani—*The Happy Happy Caterpillar*, one of the many books the nation donated to the village a few months ago.

Uncle Karin picks up his son as he hugs Serija. "Thank you, Serija," he says. "You're a special one. Never let them convince you otherwise."

In the morning a transport lands in the middle of the village and leaves a few minutes later carrying Uncle Karin and Alani. As Serija watches it fly over the mountains she mutters a prayer that the nation will save Alani.

"I love the nation," she tells her grandfather, who instead of agreeing kicks the dirt road and walks silently back home.

The next two months pass quickly. The rice in front of the house grows like weeds, leaving her grandfather to shake his head at its success. Serija knows he doesn't like accepting the genetically altered rice seeds offered by the nation, but the motes kill any other rice the villagers plant. The nation claims this resulted from a bio-programming accident, but Serija's grandfather continually questions this fact.

Then, in the middle of a school day—as the teacher talks about how the nation can cure even the worst injuries and diseases—a transport buzzes the village. All the kids run to the windows to look.

"What perfect timing," the teacher announces as if surprised. "Everyone is dismissed early to greet Alani's return."

I love the nation, Serija thinks as she runs to the sports field in the middle of the village, where the transport lands. The transport's doors remain shut, reminding Serija of the street-puppet plays in the city and how the curtains on those tiny stages didn't part until the audience was large enough. Sure enough, once a crowd gathers, the transport's ramp lowers, and Alani and Uncle Karin step out. Alani is excited to see everyone and waves as he runs to his grandmother and aunts. He squeals and claps and seems in perfect health.

But what Serija can't stop staring at is her cousin's bare face. He no longer wears a scarf to keep the motes from his nose and mouth.

Uncle Karin appears embarrassed by the attention. He nods to friends and hugs his son close.

Not sure what to think, Serija looks at the people around her. They are clapping, happy to have Alani back safe and sound. Knowing this can't possibly be a wrong thought, Serija also claps.

In her mind, the claps sound off like hundreds of hands chanting *na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion*.

The next day Alani is back in class. He tells his friends of his amazing experiences—about the flying machines and foods far sweeter than any dessert and how he went to sleep with a headache and woke up feeling no pain.

Serija notices that several of the other kids are mimicking Alani and no longer wearing scarves over their mouths and noses. While Serija knows the scarves never actually stopped the motes, she fights the urge to pull everyone's shirts over their noses and order them to breathe through the woven threads.

"Welcome back, Alani," the teacher says as it appears before them. "Serija, what do you think—should we do something special to celebrate Alani's return?"

The teacher speaks these words as if asking a simple question, but a shiver runs through Serija's skin as she smells burned oranges. She knows the question is important. She doesn't know why, but importance flickers around her just like the hologram's unblinking stare.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. *I love Alani*. "Maybe we should have a party?" she asks.

The teacher nods. "Very good, Serija. Very good indeed. You've come a long way."

Behind Serija, Alani claps in excitement.

Serija, though, merely smiles.

That night Serija wraps *The Happy Happy Caterpillar* as a present for Alani. The book is his favorite, and she'll give it to him at school in the morning when they hold his party.

She sits at the tiny table in the kitchen, her fingers playing over the present—and imagining Alani's happiness as he sees it—when the front door slams open and her grandfather storms in. He'd taken a bottle of whiskey to Uncle Karin's house earlier that evening as a welcome home gift. She'd expected him to be gone until late at night.

Serija smells alcohol on her grandfather, and she watches as he kicks the back wall of the little house three times. Serija remembers her mother's stories of him being the most feared fighter in these lands. Until now she'd never truly believed her grandfather could hurt someone.

From outside she hears someone running up the steps. Uncle Karin bursts inside, his right eye swollen and bloody.

"Brother," Uncle Karin says, pleading.

"No!" her grandfather yells. "You let their soldiers in your house. In your house!"

Serija shivers, feeling wrong thoughts flooding her head. Grabbing the gift-wrapped book, she runs for her room and dives under the bed covers. *I love the nation*, she prays, trying to drown out her grandfather's words.

"What would you have me do?" Uncle Karin asks. "They saved my son. They were merely being polite by stopping by."

"We fought them. All of us. Your own wife refused to be healed by them."

"Yes, we fought them. But we can't win against the damn motes."

"Maybe not by fighting. But we can't give in . . ."

"I won't let my family die like yours."

There is silence for far longer than Serija can bear before Uncle Karin apologizes. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It doesn't matter," her grandfather says. "The nation knew what you'd say before you said it. They knew you'd apologize before you did. We can't fight that. But I still refuse to give in."

Serija doesn't hear what Uncle Karin says, but his boots tap on the floor as they walk to where her grandfather stands. She imagines the two men hugging. She imagines them whispering their love for everyone, including the nation.

But all she knows for certain is that Uncle Karin is silent for a moment before walking outside and closing the door behind him.

Her grandfather remains in the kitchen, muttering that he won't give in. He'll never give in.

A bottle smashes as his boots kick the wall over and over.

In the morning Serija wakes to find she's ripped part of the wrapping from the book while she slept. Climbing from her bed, she walks out the open front door. Her grandfather sits on the front steps staring at his rice fields.

All of the rice plants are dead. An ocean of brown stalks wave at them like fingers without hands as the wind ripples the field.

Only her grandfather's fields are dead. The fields of their neighbors and friends—even Uncle Karin's fields—are green and full of life and nearing harvest.

Serija sits next to her grandfather, who hugs her. "You must forgive me, Serija," he says. "I have been a stubborn, angry man."

Serija remembers the pride she felt when her grandfather saved her in the city. How he'd shamed her neighbors for being too afraid to help Serija after her family died.

But now, as Serija looks at her grandfather's dead rice fields, she knows Uncle Karin and the other villagers will treat them just like those people back in the city. Everyone will be too afraid of the nation to risk giving food to them. They'll

be isolated until they starve to death or leave the village for somewhere else. But where else can they go?

"I love the nation," she whispers. "I really do."

Her grandfather hugs her again. "I know. But now I need you to do something for me. The nation may be already listening, but I would feel better speaking to them in person."

Serija nods. She loves the nation, but she also loves her grandfather and would do anything to help him.

Serija fills her backpack with the few clothes she owns then walks to the school with her grandfather. She holds the giftwrapped copy of *The Happy Happy Caterpillar*. She hopes she'll see Alani before they leave, but if not she'll place the book on his desk at school.

Assuming, that is, the nation agrees with her grandfather's plan.

I love the nation, she thinks.

It's too early for the kids to be in the school so the building is silent. The projector, though, hums as it always does.

"Teacher?" Serija asks. "Are you there?"

The teacher appears before them. "Serija, you are very early. Why is this?"

"We need help," Serija says. "Our rice is dead. And now people will be afraid to help us."

"There is nothing I can do," the hologram says, its head shaking slowly in a simulacrum of sadness. "The nation can't change the truth of what your family has done."

Serija understands. This is the response she expected. After all, she allowed many bad thoughts to cloud her mind in recent months. There is nothing she can do but accept punishment for this.

But she also remembers the lessons she learned long ago about algorithms. About how the teacher is likely flowing to nothing more than the information being fed into it. But Serija's grandfather used to be an engineer and also knows about algorithms. He'll know how to reach beyond the teacher and find someone who can help.

"I wish to accept responsibility for my actions," her grandfather announces. "I have no desire for Serija to be punished for what I've done."

For a moment the teacher freezes, as if the hologram doesn't know how to respond. When the teacher flicks back to life it looks a little more alive, as if a real person is now listening in.

"That is a brave admission," the teacher says. "But I can still do nothing."

"Do you know who I am?" Serija's grandfather asks.

"Yes. Years ago we would have killed to hear you say these words. But you are now irrelevant."

"I am indeed. But before I fought you I was a design engineer. And I built something. Something you'll want."

The teacher flickers again, as if more real people are listening in and controlling its reactions. "Proceed."

"Before your motives overwhelmed everyone, I found a way to defeat them. I will turn my designs over to you, along with my prototype weapons, if you give Serija a new home."

The teacher stares as the people behind its façade consider. "And of course," her grandfather adds to sweeten the offer, "I will also publicly confess my sins before the entire world and accept punishment."

After an eternity of staring ahead with unblinking eyes, the teacher nods. "You will indeed be punished. But if you turn over the weapons, and confess in public, we will take care of Serija."

"I love the nation," Serija whispers.

But for once it feels like no one is listening to what she says.

Serija and her grandfather leave the school and follow the dirt road through the village and up toward the mountains. An armed drone watches over them and the garrison's three soldiers follow from a safe distance. Villagers emerge from their homes to watch. Uncle Karin runs up to them and asks what is happening, but Serija's grandfather merely hugs him tightly before walking on.

It takes them several hours to reach a small cave hidden in the mountains. The drone hovers over the entrance while the soldiers stay well back.

"We must enter together," Serija's grandfather says. "They are worried this is some type of ambush."

"I'm scared," Serija says.

"I know. But the nation said you had to enter with me. They know I won't release any weapon as long as you're with me."

Serija nods, suddenly realizing that, perhaps, the motes can't tell everything about what a person will do. She follows her grandfather into the cave.

The cave runs deep as they slip and slide into the mountains like the mote-filled rice Serija swallows for dinner. She wonders if the mountains will eat her. If this is the mountains' price for given her a temporary taste of safety.

Afraid, she holds her grandfather's hand. His flashlight jumps lines of shake and scare off the walls as they step into a large cavern many times the size of their home. Workbenches line the cave with old monitors and screens blinking ghost glows at them while holographic designs spin through water drops falling from stalactites. There are also toys here, and one wall is hand-painted with mountains and people playing under a smiley-face sun.

"Your mother painted those when she was young," Serija's grandfather says. "When the war started it wasn't safe to live in the village so we sheltered here. While I worked on weapons to help the fight, your mother played."

Serija kicks a small doll from the dust. Beside the doll's dust print rests one of the bouncing balls Serija used to stare at in the city's toy stores but could never afford to buy. She tosses the ball at the wall and catches it when it bounces back.

"Why didn't the nation . . ." Serija freezes in fear, unable to finish the sentence.

"Why didn't they find this place? Because I never thought about it once I left here." Her grandfather leans in close as he grins. "And we're too deep in the mountain for the nation to detect this cave."

"But the motes . . ." Serija sniffs the air. For the first time in forever she doesn't smell the tinge of burnt oranges.

"The motes are here," her grandfather says, "but they're inactive because they can't broadcast or receive through so much stone."

Serija shivers, realizing her dreams of the mountains protecting her have come true. For a moment the smile slips from her face. When nothing bad happens, she thinks a curse word.

"I hate the nation," she whispers.

"Me too," her grandfather says. "I hate the nation," he yells.

Serija joins him in screaming against the nation. Her anger echoes off the cave walls. Her hatred bounces back at her like the ball in her hand. She and her grandfather yell and scream and finally collapse into each other's arms on the dusty floor, gasping for breath as they giggle.

"We can fight," Serija says. "Mother always said to never stop fighting."

"It'll do no good." Her grandfather walks to one of his workbenches. He picks up a small sphere, one of dozens resting on the table. "I created our own motes to seek out and destroy the nation's. Inside each of these spheres are millions of my nano-machines—enough to cleanse a small town of the nation's motes. Our fighters were supposed to take them across the land and release them."

Serija rests her ball on the table and carefully touches one of the spheres. She tries to imagine life without the motes. It would be like this cave growing bigger and bigger until it covered the entire world. Serija could shout her anger and hatred at the nation without anyone dying.

"We must release them," she says, rolling a sphere between her hands. This is freedom, she realizes. Freedom waiting to be born.

"We can't. When I tested my motes, they did indeed destroy the nation's motes. But the nation created a failsafe in their nano system. If someone tries to destroy their motes, the motes attack their hosts' nervous system, killing them."

"Killing?"

Her grandfather nods. "If any of these spheres were opened, anyone nearby who was infected with the nation's motes would die. This one ball would kill everyone in our valley. I couldn't allow such death, so I never used them."

Serija hits the table, causing her mother's bouncing ball to roll toward her. "It's not fair!"

"No, it's not. But dealings with the nation will never be fair."

"We should tell the world what they've done. That's why they killed mother—she was trying to tell people."

"The world doesn't care. All outsiders see is that, after years of war, there is peace here. And if a few of us are occasionally killed by the motes, well, it's hard to prove the nation did that."

Serija understands. When she lived in the city she watched the news shows from around the world, but few ever showed anything about where she lived. To anyone outside their land, this simply looks like peace. A dull, boring, no-need-to-be-involved peace.

Her grandfather pulls from his pocket a scanner the nation soldiers gave him. "Are you ready, Serija?" he asks. Serija knows the plan. The scanner will activate the motes in the cave and increase their ability to broadcast through the mountain's stone. If the motes detect nothing wrong in the thoughts of Serija or her grandfather, the soldiers will enter to collect this equipment.

Serija takes a deep breath and clears her thoughts. She must change her thoughts, so anger becomes happiness and hatred love. She smiles. She thinks on how she loves the nation. She twists her thoughts so what she truly thinks isn't what she thinks.

As her grandfather takes one last look at the cave, Serija picks up her mother's ball from the worktable.

That's what it is, she thinks. My mother's ball.

She nods at her grandfather. She is ready. He turns on the scanner and she smells oranges burning around her. She imagines the millions of motes inside her and in this cave reaching up and broadcasting their findings through the mountain.

This is Serija, the motes say. She loves the nation. She is holding her mother's bouncing ball. She wants nothing more than peace, a never-ending peace, until the day she dies.

When the soldiers enter they tell Serija and her grandfather to go outside, where a transport waits for them. As the soldiers begin packing up her grandfather's equipment, Serija realizes their last chance to fight back against the nation is now gone.

I love the nation, she thinks.

* * *

Serija and her grandfather stand on a stage in the capital city, exactly where Serija's mother stood shortly before she was killed. But Serija knows her grandfather won't be killed for what he's about to say.

Thousands of people are packed into the plaza to hear this famous freedom fighter—people from all over the city, along with a few dignitaries from other lands who wear fancy breathing masks so they won't inhale the motes. Serija even recognizes a few of her neighbors. Everyone stands quiet, patient, knowing that being here shows the nation they won't cause trouble. Everyone knows listening to her grandfather's confession will prove their love to the nation.

Suddenly the teacher appears beside Serija and her grandfather. While the hologram isn't acting as a teacher right now, that's still how Serija thinks of it. "The broadcasts are ready," the teacher says. "The world is watching. Please speak as we discussed."

Serija's grandfather hugs her as he steps to the front of the stage. Serija imagines all the people around the world watching her grandfather as he confesses to fighting against the nation. As he describes how he killed nation soldiers and was merciless in his anger. How he didn't care about the pain he caused the nation. He says he'd probably still be fighting if it wasn't for the motes.

"But the motes are a good thing," her grandfather says. "I realize this now. The nation has brought peace to our land. True peace."

The crowd nods and applauds, each clap sounding like *na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion* in Serija's mind.

The world is indeed watching, she realizes. She imagines her Uncle Karin and Alani watching in their village. She imagines millions of people seeing their only glimpse of her land and feeling happiness at the peace the nation has given them.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. The teacher smiles approval at her and nods its holographic head.

Serija places her hand in her pocket and squeezes the bouncing ball her mother used to play with.

I love that the world is watching this, she thinks, causing another nod from the teacher.

I love my mother, she thinks, causing the teacher to look at her in slight puzzlement. Serija squeezes the bouncing ball harder. She taps open the access panel on the ball.

I love that the whole world is watching, Serija thinks again. *They won't believe you didn't do this*. Serija pulls the bouncing ball that isn't a ball from her pocket. She imagines the city before her is actually her grandfather's valley. That the buildings surrounding the plaza are the mountains that protected her.

Her grandfather said each sphere contained enough motes to cleanse their entire valley. Since she won't see her grandfather's home again, this will have to be her valley.

She wishes she could see the motes falling from the sphere, but they are too small. She wishes she could see the nation people who've been monitoring her thoughts as they realize her thoughts lied to them—that the ball she's been carrying isn't the ball she convinced herself she was carrying.

The teacher's algorithmic face freezes as if the people behind it are screaming in rage. Serija's head pounds and she tastes burning oranges in her mouth. The nation has ordered the motes to kill her, she realizes. But they're too late. Her grandfather's motes are already killing the nation's motes, which in their own death spasm cause Serija and the crowds of people around her to gasp and die.

As pain slams Serija's body and she falls to the stage, she smiles at the teacher's face.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. *I love love love the nation*. ○

CALVED

Sam J. Miller

Sam J. Miller <www.samjmilller.com> is a writer and a community organizer. His fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Shimmer*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Minnesota Review*, and *The Rumpus*, among others. He is a nominee for the Nebula Award, a winner of the Shirley Jackson Award, and a graduate of the Clarion Writer's Workshop. Sam's first story for us takes a brutal look at a father struggling to connect with his son in a harsh and unforgiving future.

My son's eyes were broken. Emptied out. Frozen over. None of the joy or gladness was there. None of the tears. Normally I'd return from a job and his face would split down the middle with happiness, seeing me for the first time in three months. Now it stayed flat as ice. His eyes leapt away the instant they met mine. His shoulders were broader and his arms more sturdy, and lone hairs now stood on his upper lip, but his eyes were all I saw.

"Thede," I said, grabbing him.

He let himself be hugged. His arms hung limply at his sides. My lungs could not fill. My chest tightened from the force of all the never-let-me-go bear hugs he had given me over the course of the past fifteen years, and might never give again.

"You know how he gets when you're away," his mother had said on the phone the night before, preparing me. "He's a teenager now. Hating your parents is a normal part of it."

I hadn't listened. My hands and thighs still ached from months of straddling an ice saw; my hearing was worse with every trip; a slip had cost me five days' work and five days' pay and five days' worth of infirmary bills; I had returned to a sweat-smelling bunk in an illegal room I shared with seven other iceboat workers—and none of it mattered because in the morning I would see my son.

"Hey," he murmured emotionlessly. "Dad."

I stepped back, turned away until the red ebbed out of my face. Spring had come and the city had lowered its photoshade. It felt good, even in the cold wind.

"You guys have fun," Lajla said, pressing money discreetly into my palm. I watched her go, with a rising sense of panic. *Bring back my son*, I wanted to shout, *the one who loves me. Where is he? What have you done with him? Who is this surly creature?* Below us, through the ubiquitous steel grid that held up Qaanaaq's two million lives, black Greenland water sloshed against the locks of our floating city.

Breathe, Dom, I told myself, and eventually I could. *You knew this was coming. You knew one day he would cease to be a kid.*

"How's school?" I asked.

Thede shrugged. "Fine."

"Math still your favorite subject?"

"Math was never my favorite subject."

I was pretty sure that it had been, but I didn't want to argue.

"What's your favorite subject?"

Another shrug. We had met at the sea lion rookery, but I could see at once that Thede no longer cared about sea lions. He stalked through the crowd with me, his face a frozen mask of anger.

I couldn't blame him for how easy he had it. So what if he didn't live in the Brooklyn foster-care barracks, or work all day at the solar-cell plant school? He still had to live in a city that hated him for his dark skin and ice-grunt father.

"Your mom says you got into the Institute," I said, unsure even of what that was. A management school, I imagined. A big deal for Thede. But he only nodded.

At the fry stand, Thede grimaced at my clunky Swedish. The counter girl shifted to a flawless English, but I would not be cheated of the little bit of the language that I knew. "French fries and coffee for me and my son," I said, or thought I did, because she looked confused and then Thede muttered something and she nodded and went away.

And then I knew why it hurt so much, the look on his face. It wasn't that he wasn't a kid anymore. I could handle him growing up. What hurt was how he looked at me: like the rest of them look at me, these Swedes and grid city natives for whom I would forever be a stupid New York refugee, even if I did get out five years before the Fall.

Gulls fought over food thrown to the lions. "How's your mom?"

"She's good. Full manager now. We're moving to Arm Three, next year."

His mother and I hadn't been meant to be. She was born here, her parents Black Canadians employed by one of the big Swedish construction firms that built Qaanaaq, back when the Greenland Melt began to open up the interior for resource extraction and grid cities started sprouting all along the coast. They'd kept her in public school, saying it would be good for a future manager to be able to relate to the immigrants and workers she'd one day command, and they were right. She even fell for one of them, a fresh-off-the-boat North American taking tech classes, but wised up pretty soon after she saw how hard it was to raise a kid on an ice worker's pay. I had never been mad at her. Lajla was right to leave me, right to focus on her job. Right to build the life for Thede that I couldn't.

"Why don't you learn Swedish?" he asked a French fry, unable to look at me.

"I'm trying," I said. "I need to take a class. But they cost money, and anyway I don't have—"

"Don't have time. I know. Han's father says people make time for the things that are important for them." Here his eyes *did* meet mine, and held, sparkling with anger and abandonment.

"Han one of your friends?"

Thede nodded, eyes escaping.

Han's father would be Chinese, and not one of the laborers who helped build this city—all of them went home to hardship-job rewards. He'd be an engineer or manager for one of the extraction firms. He would live in a nice house and work in an office. He would be able to make choices about how he spent his time.

"I have something for you," I said, in desperation.

I hadn't brought it for him. I carried it around with me, always. Because it was comforting to have it with me, and because I couldn't trust that the men I bunked with wouldn't steal it.

Heart slipping, I handed over the NEW YORK F CKING CITY T-shirt that was my most—my only—prized possession. Thin as paper, soft as baby bunnies. My mom had made me scratch the letter U off, before I could wear the thing to school. And Little

Thede had loved it. We made a big ceremony of putting it on only once a year, on his birthday, and noting how much he had grown by how much it had shrunk on him. Sometimes if I stuck my nose in it and breathed deeply enough, I could still find a trace of the laundromat in the basement of my mother's building. Or the brake-screch stink of the subway. What little was left of New York City was inside that shirt. Parting with it meant something, something huge and irrevocable.

But my son was slipping through my fingers. And he mattered more than the lost city where whatever else I was—starving, broke, an urchin, a criminal—I belonged.

"Dad," Thede whispered, taking it. And here, at last, his eyes came back. The eyes of a boy who loved his father. Who didn't care that his father was a thick-skulled obstinate immigrant grunt. Who believed his father could do anything. "Dad. You love this shirt."

But I love you more, I did not say. Than anything. Instead: "It'll fit you just fine now." And then: "Enough sea lions. Beam fights?"

Thede shrugged. I wondered if they had fallen out of fashion while I was away. So much did, every time I left. The ice ships were the only work I could get, capturing calved glacier chunks and breaking them down into drinking water to be sold to the wide new swaths of desert that ringed the globe, and the work was hard and dangerous and kept me forever in limbo.

Only two fighters in the first fight, both lithe and swift and thin, their styles an amalgam of Chinese martial arts. Not like the big bruising New York boxers who had been the rage when I arrived, illegally, at fifteen years old, having paid two drunks to vouch for my age. Back before the Fail-Proof Trillion-Dollar NYC Flood-Surge Locks had failed, and 80 percent of the city sunk, and the grid cities banned all new East Coast arrivals. Now the North Americans in Arm Eight were just one of many overcrowded, underskilled labor forces for the city's corporations to exploit.

They leapt from beam to beam, fighting mostly in kicks, grappling briefly when both met on the same beam. I watched Thede. Thin, fragile Thede, with the wide eyes and nostrils that seemed to take in all the world's ugliness, all its stink. He wasn't having a good time. When he was twelve he had begged me to bring him. I had pretended to like it, back then, for his sake. Now he pretended for mine. We were both acting out what we thought the other wanted, and that thought should have troubled me. But that's how it had been with my dad. That's what I thought being a man meant. I put my hand on his shoulder and he did not shake it off. We watched men harm each other high above us.

Thede's eyes burned with wonder, staring up at the fretted sweep of the wind-screen as we rose to meet it. We were deep in a days-long twilight; soon, the Sun would set for weeks.

"This is *not* happening," he said, and stepped closer to me. His voice shook with joy.

The elevator ride to the top of the city was obscenely expensive. We'd never been able to take it before. His mother had bought our tickets. Even for her, it hurt. I wondered why she hadn't brought him herself.

"He's getting bullied a lot in school," she told me on the phone. Behind her was the solid comfortable silence of a respectable home. My background noise was four men building toward a fight over a card game. "Also, I think he might be in love."

But of course I couldn't ask him about either of those things. The first was my fault; the second was something no boy wanted to discuss with his dad.

I pushed a piece of trough meat loose from between my teeth. Savored how close it came to the real thing. Only with Thede, with his mother's money, did I get to buy the classy stuff. Normally it was barrel-bottom for me, greasy chunks that dissolved in my mouth two chews in, homebrew meat moonshine made in melt-scrap-furnace-heated metal troughs. Some grid cities were rumored to still have cows, but that was

the kind of lie people tell themselves to make life a little less ugly. Cows were extinct, and real beef was a joy no one would ever experience again.

The windscreen was an engineering marvel, and absolutely gorgeous. It shifted in response to headwinds; in severe storms the city would raise its auxiliary screens to protect its entire circumference. The tiny panes of plastiglass were common enough—a thriving underground market sold the fallen ones as good luck charms—but to see them knitted together was to tremble in the face of staggering genius. Complex patterns of crenellated reliefs, efficiently diverting windshear no matter what angle it struck from. Bots swept past us on the metal gridlines, replacing panes that had fallen or cracked.

Once, hand gripping mine tightly, somewhere down in the city beneath us, six-year-old Thede had asked me how the windscreen worked. He'd asked me a lot of things then, about the locks that held the city up, and how they could rise in response to tides and ocean-level increases; about the big boats with strange words and symbols on the side, and where they went, and what they brought back. "What's in that boat?" he'd ask, about each one, and I would make up ridiculous stories. "That's a giraffe boat. That one brings back machine guns that shoot strawberries. That one is for naughty children." In truth I only ever recognized the ice boats, which carried a multitude of pincers atop cranes all along their sides.

My son stood up straighter, sixty stories above his city. Some rough weight had fallen from his shoulders. He'd be strong, I saw. He'd be handsome. If he made it. If this horrible city didn't break him inside in some irreparable way. If marauding whiteboys didn't bash him for the dark skin he got from his mom. If the firms didn't pass him over for the lack of family connections on his stuttering immigrant father's side. I wondered who was bullying him, and why, and I imagined taking them two at a time and slamming their heads together so hard they popped like bubbles full of blood. Of course I couldn't do that. I also imagined hugging him, grabbing him for no reason and maybe never letting go, but I couldn't do that either. He would wonder why.

"I called last night and you weren't in," I said. "Doing anything fun?"

"We went to the cityoke arcade," he said.

I nodded like I knew what that meant. Later on I'd have to ask the men in my room. I couldn't keep up with this city, with its endlessly shifting fashions and slang and the new immigrant clusters that cropped up each time I blinked. Twenty years after arriving, I was still a stranger. I wasn't just Fresh Off the Boat, I was constantly getting back on the boat and then getting off again. That morning I'd gone to the job center for the fifth day in a row, and been relieved to find no boat postings. Only twelve-month gigs, and I wasn't that hungry yet. Booking a year-long job meant admitting you were old, desperate, unmoored, willing to accept payment only marginally more than nothing, for the privilege of a hammock and three bowls of trough slop a day. But captains picked their own crews for the shorter runs, and I worried that the lack of postings meant that with fewer boats going out the competition had become too fierce for me. Every day a couple of hundred new workers arrived from sunken cities in India or Middle Europe, or from any of a hundred Water-War-torn nations. Men and women stronger than me, younger, more determined.

With effort, I brought my mind back to the here and now. Twenty other people stood in the arc pod with us. Happy, wealthy people. I wondered if they knew I wasn't one of them. I wondered if Thede was.

They smiled down at their city. They thought it was so stable. I'd watched ice sheets calve off the glacier that were five times the size of Qaanaaq. When one of those came drifting in our direction, the windscreen wouldn't help us. The question was when, not if. I knew a truth they did not: how easy it is to lose something—everything—forever.

A Maoist Nepalese foreman, on one of my first ice ship runs, said white North Americans were the worst for adapting to the post-Arctic world, because we'd lived for centuries in a bubble of believing the world was way better than it actually was. Shielded by willful blindness and complex interlocking institutions of privilege, we mistook our uniqueness for universality.

I'd hated him for it. It took me fifteen years to see that he was right.

"What do you think of those two?" I asked, pointing with my chin at a pair of girls his age.

For a while he didn't answer. Then he said, "I know you can't help that you grew up in a backward macho culture, but can't you just keep that on the inside?"

My own father would have cuffed me if I talked to him like that, but I was too afraid of rupturing the tiny bit of affectionate credit I'd fought so hard to earn back.

His stance softened, then. He took a tiny step closer—the only apology I could hope for.

The pod began its descent. Halfway down he unzipped his jacket, smiling in the warmth of the heated pod while below-zero winds buffeted us. His T-shirt said *The Last Calf*, and showed the gangly sad-eyed hero of that depressing, miserable movie all the kids adored.

"Where is it?" I asked. He'd proudly sported the NEW YORK F CKING CITY shirt on each of the five times I'd seen him since giving it to him.

His face darkened so fast I was frightened. His eyes welled up. He said, "Dad, I," but his voice had the tremor that meant he could barely keep from crying. Shame was what I saw.

I couldn't breathe again, just like when I came home two weeks ago and he wasn't glad to see me. Seeing my son so unhappy now hurt worse than fearing he hated me.

"Did somebody take it from you?" I asked, leaning in so no one else could hear me. "Someone at school? A bully?"

He looked up, startled. He shook his head. Then he nodded.

"Tell me who did this."

He shook his head again. "Just some guys, Dad," he said. "Please. I don't want to talk about it."

"Guys. How many?"

He said nothing. I understood about snitching. I knew he'd never tell me who.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Okay? It's just a shirt. I don't care about it. I care about you. I care that you're okay. Are you okay?"

Thede nodded. And smiled. And I knew he was telling the truth, even if I wasn't, even if inside I was grieving the shirt, and the little boy who I once wrapped up inside it.

When I wasn't with Thede, I walked. For two weeks I'd gone out walking every day. Up and down Arm Eight, and sometimes into other Arms. Through shantytowns large and small, huddled miserable agglomerations of recent arrivals and folks who even after a couple of generations in Qaanaaq had not been able to scrape their way up from the fish-stinking ice-slippery bottom.

I looked for sex, sometimes. It had been so long. Relationships were tough in my line of work, and I'd never been interested in paying for it. Throughout my twenties I could usually find a woman for something brief and fun and free of commitment, but that stage of my life seemed to have ended.

I wondered why I hadn't tried harder to make it work with Lajla. I think a small but vocal and terrible part of me had been glad to see her leave. Fatherhood was hard work. So was being married. Paying rent on a tiny shitty apartment way out on Arm Seven, where we smelled like scorched cooking oil and diaper lotion all the time. Selfishly, I had been glad to be alone. And only now, getting to know this

stranger who was once my son, did I see what sweet and fitting punishments the universe had up its sleeve for selfishness.

My time with Thede was wonderful, and horrible. We could talk at length about movies and music, and he actually seemed halfway interested in my stories about old New York, but whenever I tried to talk about life or school or girls or his future he reverted to grunts and monosyllables. Something huge and heavy stood between me and him, a moon eclipsing the sun. I knew him, top to bottom and body and soul, but he still had no idea who I really was. How I felt about him. I had no way to show him. No way to open his eyes, make him see how much I loved him, show him how I was really a good guy who'd gotten a bad deal in life.

Cityoke, it turned out, was like karaoke, except instead of singing a song you visited a city. XHD footage projection onto all four walls; temperature control; short storylines that responded to your verbal decisions—even actual smells uncorked by machines from secret stashes of Beijing taxi-seat leather or Ho Chi Minh City incense or Portland coffeeshop sawdust. I went there often, hoping maybe to see him. To watch him, with his friends. See what he was when I wasn't around. But cityoke was expensive, and I could never have afforded to actually go in. Once, standing around outside the New York booth when a crew walked out, I caught a whiff of the acrid ugly beautiful stink of the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

And then, eventually, I walked without any reason at all. Because pretty soon I wouldn't be able to. Because I had done it. I had booked a twelve-month job. I was out of money and couldn't afford to rent my bed for another month. Thede's mom could have given it to me. But what if she told him about it? He'd think of me as more of a useless moocher deadbeat dad than he already did. I couldn't take that chance.

Three days before my ship was set to load up and launch, I went back to the cityoke arcades. Men lurked in doorways and between shacks. Soakers, mostly. Looking for marks; men to mug and drunks to tip into the sea. Late at night; too late for Thede to come carousing through. I'd called him earlier, but Lajla said he was stuck inside for the night, studying for a test in a class where he wasn't doing well. I had hoped maybe he'd sneak out, meet some friends, head for the arcade.

And that's when I saw it. The shirt: NEW YORK F CKING CITY, absolutely unique and unmistakable. Worn by a stranger, a muscular young man sitting on the stoop of a skiff moor. I didn't get a good glimpse of his face, as I hurried past with my head turned away from him.

I waited, two buildings down. My heart was alive and racing in my chest. I drew in deep gulps of cold air and tried to keep from shouting from joy. Here was my chance. Here was how I could show Thede what I really was.

I stuck my head out, risked a glance. He sat there, waiting for who knows what. In profile I could see that the man was Asian. Almost certainly Chinese, in Qaanaaq—most other Asian nations had their own grid cities—although perhaps he was descended from Asian-diaspora nationals of some other country. I could see his smile, hungry and cold.

At first I planned to confront him, ask how he came to be wearing my shirt, demand justice, beat him up and take it back. But that would be stupid. Unless I planned to kill him—and I didn't—it was too easy to imagine him gunning for Thede if he knew he'd been attacked for the shirt. I'd have to jump him, rob and strip and soak him. I rooted through a trash bin, but found nothing. Three trash bins later I found a short metal pipe with Hindi graffiti scribbled along its length. The man was still there when I went back. He was waiting for something. I could wait longer. I pulled my hood up, yanked the drawstring to tighten it around my face.

Forty-five minutes passed that way. He hugged his knees to his chest, made himself small, tried to conserve body heat. His teeth chattered. Why was he wearing so

little? But I was happy he was so stupid. If he had a sweater or jacket on I'd never have seen the shirt. I'd never have had this chance.

Finally, he stood. Looked around sadly. Brushed off the seat of his pants. Turned to go. Stepped into the swing of my metal pipe, which struck him in the chest and knocked him back a step.

The shame came later. Then, there was just joy. The satisfaction of how the pipe struck flesh. Broke bone. I'd spent twenty years getting shitted on by this city, by this system, by the cold wind and the everywhere-ice, by the other workers who were smarter or stronger or spoke the language. For the first time since Thede was a baby, I felt like I was in control of something. Only when my victim finally passed out, and rolled over onto his back and the blue methane streetlamp showed me how young he was under the blood, could I stop myself.

I took the shirt. I took his pants. I rolled him into the water. I called the med-team for him from a coinphone a block away. He was still breathing. He was young, he was healthy. He'd be fine. The pants I would burn in a scrap furnace. The shirt I would give back to my son. I took the money from his wallet and dropped it into the sea, then threw the money in later. *I'm not a thief. I'm a good father.* I said those sentences, over and over, all the way home.

Thede couldn't see me the next day. Lajla didn't know where he was. So I got to spend the whole day imagining imminent arrest, the arrival of Swedish or Chinese police, footage of me on the telescreens, my cleverness foiled by tech I didn't know existed because I couldn't read the newspapers. I packed my gig bag glumly, put the rest of my things back in the storage cube and walked it to the facility. Every five seconds I looked over my shoulder and found only the same grit and filthy slush. Every time I looked at my watch, I winced at how little time I had left.

My fear of punishment was balanced out by how happy I was. I wrapped the shirt in three layers of wrapping paper and put it in a watertight shipping bag and tried to imagine his face. That shirt would change everything. His father would cease to be a savage jerk from an uncivilized land. This city would no longer be a cold and barren place where boys could beat him up and steal what mattered most to him with impunity. All the ways I had failed him would matter a little less.

Twelve months. I had tried to get out of the gig, now that I had the shirt and a new era of good relations with my son was upon me. But canceling would have cost me my accreditation with that work center, which would make finding another job almost impossible. A year away from Thede. I would tell him when I saw him. He'd be upset, but the shirt would make it easier.

Finally, I called and he answered.

"I want to see you," I said, when we had made our way through the pleasantries.

"Sunday?" Did his voice brighten, or was that just blind stupid hope? Some trick of the noisy synthcoffee shop where I sat?

"No, Thede," I said, measuring my words carefully. "I can't. Can you do today?"

A suspicious pause. "Why can't you do Sunday?"

"Something's come up," I said. "Please? Today?"

"Fine."

The sea lion rookery. The smell of guano and the scream of gulls; the crying of children dragged away as the place shut down. The long night was almost upon us. Two male sea lions barked at each other, bouncing their chests together. Thede came a half hour late, and I had arrived a half hour early. My head swam, watching him come, at how tall he stood and how gracefully he walked. I had done something good in this world, at least. I made him. I had that, no matter how he felt about me.

Something had shifted, now, in his face. Something was harder, older, stronger.

"Hey," I said, bear-hugging him, and eventually he submitted. He hugged me back hesitantly, like a man might, and then hard, like a little boy.

"What's happening?" I asked. "What were you up to, last night?"

Thede shrugged. "Stuff. With friends."

I asked him questions. Again the sullen, bitter silence; again the terse and angry answers. Again the eyes darting around, constantly watching for whatever the next attack would be. Again the hating me, for coming here, for making him.

"I'm going away," I said. "A job."

"I figured," he said.

"I wish I didn't have to."

"I'll see you soon."

I nodded. I couldn't tell him it was a twelve-month gig. Not now.

"Here," I said, finally, pulling the package out from inside of my jacket. "I got you something."

"Thanks." He grabbed it in both hands, began to tear it open.

"Wait," I said, thinking fast. "Okay? Open it after I leave."

Open it when the news that I'm leaving has set in, when you're mad at me, for abandoning you. When you think I care only about work.

"We'll have a little time," he said. "When you get back. Before I go away. I leave in eight months. The program is four years long."

"Sure," I said, shivering inside.

"Mom says she'll pay for me to come home every year for the holiday, but she knows we can't afford that."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "'Come home.' I thought you were going to the Institute."

"I am," he said, sighing. "Do you even know what that means? The Institute's design program is in Shanghai."

"Oh," I said. "Design. What kind of design?"

My son's eyes rolled. "You're missing the point, Dad."

I was. I always was.

A shout, from a pub across the Arm. A man's shout, full of pain and anger. Thede flinched. His hands made fists.

"What?" I asked, thinking, here, at last, was something. The raw emotion on his face had to mean that a great intimacy was upon us, some primal revelation that would shatter the wall between us.

"Nothing."

"You can tell me. What's going on?"

Thede frowned, then punched the metal railing so hard he yelped. He held up his hand to show me the blood.

"Hey, Thede—"

"Han," he said. "My . . . my friend. He got jumped two nights ago. Soaked."

"This city is horrible," I whispered.

He made a baffled face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . you know. This city. Everyone's so full of anger and cruelty . . ."

"It's not the city, Dad. What does that even mean? Some sick person did this. Han was waiting for me, and Mom wouldn't let me out, and he got jumped. Because I wasn't there. They took off all his clothes, before they rolled him into the water. That's some extra cruel shit right there. He could have died. He almost did."

I nodded, silently, a siren of panic rising inside. "You really care about this guy, don't you?"

He looked at me. My son's eyes were whole, intact, defiant, adult. Thede nodded.

He's been getting bullied, his mother had told me. He's in love.

I turned away from him, before he could see the knowledge blossom in my eyes.

The shirt hadn't been stolen. He'd given it away. To the boy he loved. I saw them holding hands, saw them tug at each other's clothing in the same fumbling adolescent puppy-love moments I had shared with his mother, moments that were my only happy memories from being his age. And I saw his fear, of how his backward father might react—a refugee from a fallen hate-filled people—if he knew what kind of man he was. I gagged on the unfairness of his assumptions about me, but how could he have known differently? What had I ever done, to show him the truth of how I felt about him? And hadn't I proved him right? Hadn't I acted exactly like the monster he believed me to be? I had never succeeded in proving to him what I was, or how I felt.

I had battered and broken his beloved. There was nothing I could say. A smarter man would have asked for the present back, taken it away and locked it up. Burned it, maybe. But I couldn't. I had spent his whole life trying to give him something worthy of how I felt about him, and here was the perfect gift at last.

"I love you, Thede," I said, and hugged him.

"Daaaaaad . . ." he said, eventually.

But I didn't let go. Because when I did, he would leave. He would walk home through the cramped and frigid alleys of his home city, to the gift of knowing what his father truly was. ○

Steinwachs can't remember
how he became so dependent
on Luna City's Secret Society
of the Written Word

but he can see that they own him
now & he accepts his position
smuggling hydroponics & printers
& infocubes

all in exchange
for a steady trickle of rough
hemp-paper printouts folded &
bound into secret chronicles

that somehow remain completely
untraceable to
electronic authorities
incapable of unplugging

and in the margins
of his favorite folios
he haltingly adds
his own story

—Herb Kauderer

HARD COPY

LAST HUNT

Vylar Kaftan

Vylar Kaftan has sold about fifty short stories to various magazines. Her alternate history novella, “The Weight of the Sunrise” (*Asimov’s*, February 2013), won the 2013 Nebula Award. Vylar is the founder of FOGcon, an annual science fiction convention in the San Francisco Bay Area. Of her latest tale she says, “While I’ve never killed and skinned a seal, I grew up in Wisconsin and am familiar with -70 degrees wind chill on my face.”

The noon sky blazed red. My senses focused, alert and watchful. The snowy plain where I knelt reflected skyfire. Near the sleds, the dogs barked, their breath curling white in the air. A flame-trail burst across the sky, then quickly faded to smoke. A loud boom shook me. Hot wind warmed my frosted hood.

I stood up, looking at the sky through my slitted snow-goggles. I tilted them on my nose, as if the bones themselves might deceive me, but smoke still drifted overhead. What I saw was true. I gripped my seal-call tightly, but I did not show fear. A hunter swallowed fear.

My cousin Tatigaq stared spellbound at the sky. For a moment I thought his soul was captured, but then remembered my cousin lacked *isuma*. He had neither maturity nor judgment. Any good hunter knew a surprise meant *watch in all directions*. Surprise was emotion; it could kill. I had better sense despite being only fourteen and lacking a penis. But my name-soul, Atuat, also belonged to my grandfather. That made me wiser than others my age.

Suddenly freed from his spell, Tatigaq ran toward the dogs. That at least showed *isuma*, as the dogs were our lives. “Little Grandfather,” he called anxiously, as he soothed them, “What was that?”

I gave a pointed look. Tatigaq always asked me questions, as one did when speaking to a baby. *Isuma* meant he should watch and learn for himself.

Tatigaq glared back. “You won’t be so rude when you stop being a boy.”

“I won’t ever stop being a boy,” I told him. “I am Atuat, our grandfather. Besides, both my sisters would think you a fool for insulting me with questions.”

“You won’t be a boy when you have my babies.”

Tatigaq was a child, despite being nearly twenty. That was why our marriage had not been performed. Sometimes I wondered if he might never grow up, and I’d die a boy. Maybe this life was something my grandfather’s soul had arranged for me. I did not want to be a girl and care for an iglu. But I was *sipiniq*, because my penis had split into a vulva when I was born. So I must have babies like a woman, despite my male soul. Only a shaman could stay *sipiniq* for life, and I had no such gift.

I wanted to tell Tatigaq he couldn't even fix his own mukluks. But it was never wise to argue with a child. It weakened the adult, and taught the child insolence. So I shrugged and looked to the west. I saw faint smoke from where the skyfire had vanished.

"I'm *joking*," said Tatigaq. "Laugh like a man."

I knew that wasn't fair. Tatigaq's jokes were half-true and not funny. I went to my dogs. My leader snapped at her harness-mate, so I broke them up with a shout. Once I was sure my dogs were fine, I led them toward the smoke, expecting Tatigaq would follow. I was sure he was annoyed, but I didn't care. I wanted to understand what I'd seen. This was my last hunt before becoming a woman. If I died from curiosity, at least I'd die a hunter.

Just beyond a rocky ridge, I found a huge wet dent in the ice, like spring had thawed only one place. It was deepest near me, and extended away in a long tail. I'd never seen a mark like it. It looked like something round, perhaps as big as five bears, had struck and skidded away. Ridges in the long tail supported my idea. I walked around it, then knelt and sniffed. The snow smelled like fire mixed with some foul shaman's brew.

Tatigaq led his team next to me. We looked at the indentation, our breath frosting our furs. Finally Tatigaq said, "We should get the elders."

"I want to know what it is," I said.

For answer, Tatigaq jumped on his sled and drove away. But I knew he was weak and would follow a stronger hunter. So I rushed my team past him, breaking the deep snow, then circled toward the skyfire. I didn't look back. As I expected, Tatigaq called his dogs, and soon his sled whispered behind me.

I spotted a structure on the horizon. Larger than any cairn, it shimmered like a melting lake. I drove my dogs closer. Before me lay a jumble; I couldn't think how else to call it. A giant ball lay broken in pieces. Long spears jutted every direction. Black smoke rose from the jumble, thick and rough on my nose. Heat like summertime pressed at my face. I pushed back my parka hood, slowly circling the mess. It reminded me of a wrecked whaling boat.

Fascinated, I came closer. One shiny section looked like broken crust over icy water; cracks radiated from a shallow indentation, as if someone had crushed it with their foot. Around the watery-looking part, lines of magical lights flickered in colors like the Aqsarniit night sky.

I glanced at Tatigaq, who stood back twenty paces with his knife half-drawn. He snorted and turned away, fussing with the dogs' harness. My cousin's movements read like prey: tense and skittish. I knew his fear was sensible, but the jumble called to me. My soul—my grandfather's soul—wanted to understand it.

I coughed on smoke and dropped one hand to my knife. Spirits. This jumble must be from the spirit world. A magical . . . something. Maybe a spirit iglu? I knew I should be careful, but curiosity overwhelmed me.

"Grandfather," Tatigaq called urgently, "Come away from there. Your parents will be angry."

What would my ancestors have done? I closed my eyes. All four of my namesakes were hunters, and I asked all of them what I should do. Grandfather was the youngest. He turned to his elder, as each man did to the hunter before him. I could always see my ancestors clearly, as if they stood before me. Usually I had trouble hearing their advice, but this time, I heard every word the eldest spoke. *Resist evil and obey good*, he told me. *Your fear must make you strong*.

Tatigaq grabbed my arm. My ancestors vanished. Startled, I planted my feet like a wrestler.

"Little Grandfather," Tatigaq said, "this is not for us."

"Decide for yourself, not me."

"Ask the elders. Let *them* decide."

I paused, loosening one heel from the snow. He had a point. Bad things happened when spirits angered, and we were not shamans. But we had both seen the sign, and signs should not be ignored.

I pulled free and walked to the terrible heat. Small flames leaped through the jumble's smoky wall. With my grandfather's courage, I reached for the curved section that looked like false ice. I touched it with my mitten.

A smaller mitten scrabbled under the ice's surface. I jumped back and nearly fell over. Tatigaq caught me, but I shoved him off. Someone was trapped—a child perhaps. I didn't know if spirit children could freeze, but I knew if I didn't help, my ancestors would condemn me.

I grabbed my seal-club from the sled. Waving my arms against the smoke, I climbed up a jumble outcropping. I braced my legs and smashed the false ice. I expected water, but more smoke poured out. A small mitten reached through, so I grabbed and pulled. A childlike spirit clambered out. I hugged it to my breasts and jumped off.

Safely on the ground, I cradled the spirit in my arms. The spirit was the size of a large baby who rarely drank milk. Shining starlight garb wrapped its body from neck to toe. Its skinny arms ended in round three-fingered mittens. Its feet bore fat raptor claws, wrapped in the same strange starlight as its body.

The spirit flailed its legs weakly, like a newborn pup. Its swollen head wore a hard, round hat that covered everything to the neck. A clear barrier in the hat covered the spirit's face. Some protection magic, I supposed. I'd never seen anything more amazing.

I stared into the hat's clear front. Two black eyes looked back—dark like caribou eyes, with no whites. Slowly the spirit blinked twice: once transparent like water, and then a second time with thicker eyelids. It had gray skin and a little flat mouth like a fish.

Curious, I gently separated its legs to see its genitals, but the shiny garb covered everything. I had hoped the spirit might be like me, wearing the wrong genitals in this world. I supposed that spirits could be male or female when they visited, but the other while in the sky. But I really didn't know. Where was it from? I wondered if it lived in a bladder like animal spirits did.

Should I carry it home? I glanced at Tatigaq through the smoke. I'd never shown any talent for spiritual matters. The elders could pray for guidance and hear the answers. Maybe the spirit belonged with the jumble, and I should fetch the elders.

But what if the spirit left before I got back?

I didn't know what to do. I rubbed my fingers together inside my mittens. I got a bad feeling from the jumble, all wrong and hot and strange. The spirit was strange too, but at least it seemed alive. So I carried the limp spirit away from the heat. My dogs barked loudly at the newcomer until Tatigaq threw them some meat.

I spread a bear fur and laid the spirit down like a baby. Tatigaq wouldn't look; he stared at the ice underfoot. I feared my weak cousin would leave with his sled. I didn't know what to do, but the spirit needed hospitality, and building an iglu would let me think. This type of snow made a poor iglu, but I only needed a little one for one night. In the morning I would take the spirit home.

I took my ivory snow-knife from the sled and cut blocks with strong, certain strokes. Tatigaq should have joined me, but he stayed back warily. "Help me," I told him.

Slowly, my cousin knelt and cut snow, keeping his eyes on the spirit. We worked in silence. A raven cried overhead. A lemming poked its head through the snow, then disappeared again. We stacked blocks in a half-circle.

As he laid a block down, Tatigaq said, "Your iglu is too small."

"It's just for the spirit," I said.

"And where then will we sleep?"

I hadn't thought about that. I was thinking of the spirit and the fiery sky. Careless, like a child. I scuffed my mitten. I was angry, but I couldn't feel that way now; too dangerous on the ice. So I scraped my emotions flat, like a knife stripping fur from skin.

I said, "Help me make it bigger."

The spirit lifted on its right arm, letting its left dangle. Its eyelids blinked shut—first the clear ones, and then the heavy ones. It opened its eyes again and gazed at me.

"Careful," hissed Tatigag, reaching for his knife.

"Don't! It's a good spirit."

"How do you know?"

"Grandfather told me," I lied. But it was a truthful lie; Grandfather had told me to obey good, and my cousin was lost to fear.

"You never hear ancestors," said Tatigag suspiciously.

"This is a powerful spirit, and it's here for something," I said. Tatigag looked skeptical, so I added, "See, it's hurt. Look how it doesn't use its left arm. Remember when you fell, four summers ago?"

Tatigag grimaced, shamed by the memory, then nodded once. Even if my cousin didn't believe me, he wouldn't risk neglecting a spirit in need.

Without speaking, we shaped the snow bricks into a dome. I cut a ceiling-block of clear ice to let in light. I did not like dark iglus even at night. The spirit lay unmoving on the furs. When I spoke, it just blinked at me. I placed the best strips of dried seal on the fur, but the spirit ignored the food. I worried I might have offended it.

Night came early, and the Moon was weak tonight. When we finished the iglu, Tatigag and I crawled inside, with the spirit wrapped in fur. We curled together, with the spirit snuggled warmly against my breasts. I slept instantly. My dreams were silent.

Just before dawn, a loud noise woke me—like a bear tearing open a walrus. I clutched the spirit. I whispered to Tatigag, but my cousin slept on. Now I was frightened. I lay awake in the endless night. The wind stole my sleep and left me in darkness, where no hunter could do anything but think. This thinking did not warm the stomach.

When I went home, I could not stay a hunter any more than a child could remain a baby. If I wanted to stay *sipiniq*, I must become a shaman. I feared the shaman's path; I would spend nights in a dark hole under the ice, listening for spirits. I must learn to see myself as bones, and bare my breasts during rituals for all to see. I did not like this idea.

But I didn't want to be a woman either, working at home all day. I must rely on Tatigag for meat and sinew, and my cousin was lazy. I would attract the animals' spirits for my husband to hunt—and watch Tatigag lose all his prey. This dependence shamed my soul. But I could not keep hunting, not as a man would. I must do women's hunting, instead of exploring the wide ice fields. Even if my people starved and women must help in the wild, as sometimes happened, hunting would never be the same for me. I would always be spare. This was simply truth.

I thought these things until the thoughts chased themselves into nothingness, and the wind carried sleep to me. I dreamed that I spoke with spirits, but when I looked around, none were near, and my mukluks had torn open.

I woke to a smoky smell. I thought it was memory, until I realized the smell filled the iglu. Firelight flickered through my icy ceiling. A drop of water splashed on my nose. I crawled out of the iglu, leaving the spirit.

The jumble burned. Flames leaped from the ball-like pieces, and foul smoke burned my nostrils. It smelled like something unworldly from beyond the sky's dome. I stared, fascinated. The dogs barked, and I shushed them. I thought the spirit might know what to do, so I reached into the iglu. Ignoring my cousin, I grabbed the spirit and showed it the fire.

The spirit shook in my arms. Its little mouth gaped through the clear hat. It screamed soundlessly, like a fish in a boat. I hugged it, feeling lost and alone. I had only a hunter's knowledge of spirits. I could thank an animal for giving its life, and return the proper parts to the spirits, but I couldn't interpret signs. All I could do was guess. I thought the spirit suffered, like a caribou lost from its herd. I tried petting its head, but it wailed silently, hopelessly.

Tatigaq crawled out of the iglu. He looked at the burning jumble. "We must leave the spirit," he said. "It will know how to go home."

"But it's lost."

"Then we should find a shaman."

"No time," I said. "Look." The spirit lay weakly in my arms, still shaking, its mouth hanging open. I recognized a dying creature. That was hunter knowledge.

"There's nothing we can do," said Tatigaq. "Let it go."

"It's dying."

He scoffed. "Spirits don't die."

"This one might," I said, irritated with myself for childish arguing.

"You're no shaman."

"I could be if I wanted to," I said, stung.

"You don't have the gift," said Tatigaq. His tone wasn't cruel, simply matter-of-fact. "Just because you're *sipiniq* doesn't make you a shaman."

I turned away, done talking. My future lay before me, as familiar as an ancestor. I foresaw my hunter's soul dying in sickness. Tatigaq would come home from each hunt with another excuse for why he had little meat. I would have to mend my cousin's gear when he rested, and know that Tatigaq hated hunting while I longed for it. It wasn't fair, and it made me so angry I couldn't breathe. I crushed the feeling to powder. I would not feel. Ice wrecked those who felt.

I looked at the spirit. Its pale eyelids fluttered, and I worried it would curse me as it died. Maybe that's why it was here—to soften my hunter's soul. Maybe its curse could make me a happy woman.

The spirit squirmed in my arms. Confused, I boosted it to my shoulder. When it kept kicking, I laid it down on the fur. It wobbled to its feet and hopped toward the jumble. The spirit walked like a goose, and I smiled at the sight.

The spirit dug at the jumble. It pushed aside blackened sections and gathered shiny things. One large shiny piece lay under a charred pile. The spirit tugged, its little legs slipping on the ice. I saw what it wanted, so I came forward. I lifted with all my strength, with no luck.

I gave Tatigaq a sharp look. My cousin reluctantly offered one hand, keeping the other on his knife. Tatigaq was tall and strong. The help was enough, and I braced the piece against my thighs and pulled it out. The jumble collapsed further. I laid the piece down for the spirit to examine, praying that I was doing right.

The spirit performed strange rituals on the pieces. It pulled things, dropped things, selected things. It worked with its right hand, using its twitchy left arm to balance pieces. I didn't understand any of it, but I fished shiny pieces out of the burned jumble and set them next to the spirit. Tatigaq watched briefly, but mostly he fussed with the dogs and pretended he was busy.

Whatever the spirit was doing, it was so lovely and intricate that I decided it was artwork. The spirit lined edges up with other edges and linked pieces together, like a woman sewing animal tails to a ceremonial parka. It twisted together strange sinew-thread that held its shape. The spirit matched colors and thicknesses together, then tucked them underneath the shiny pieces. The spirit always twisted them the same way, with a few quick motions. Sometimes the matches were identical, and other times they seemed random.

After watching for a long time, I searched the pieces for other sinew-threads. It was hard to tell what I needed. Matching colors was easy, but the threads had too many shapes. I wasn't sure what mattered. I noticed that the spirit always paired the thickest black threads together, so I copied that. The sinew was surprisingly stiff but bendable, and it held its structure when twisted. My fear became fascination. Searching carefully, I found three more sets and twisted them together.

When the spirit picked up my connected threads, it stared closely, and then set them down on the artwork. I feared I had offended, but the spirit wobbled to me and rubbed my leg with its round hat. I laughed aloud, charmed. Tatigaaq smiled too, but I saw teeth.

Over the afternoon, I tried to copy some other twists. But every time I tried, the spirit rubbed my leg, then undid my work. So I stuck with finding black sinew and setting it next to the spirit, since it always seemed to need more of that kind.

In early evening, the spirit lit the artwork's magical fires. Colors blossomed to brilliance, like a field of lichen, brighter than moonlight. The whole artwork hummed, startling me. The dogs barked at the noise, and Tatigaaq yanked their harnesses to subdue them.

Finally, the spirit stepped back from its artwork and sat down on the fur. I sat too, admiring the sight, and the spirit nestled its head against my elbow. I was glad tonight was warm and still, almost like spring. The magic I'd seen today awed me. I wished I knew what it meant. Maybe a shaman could tell me someday. Or maybe it would make sense to me after reflection. Even shamans had to meditate on complicated matters.

Nearby, Tatigaaq paced and checked the wind. He said, "We should go now, Little Grandfather."

"Soon," I agreed, staying seated.

Tatigaaq muttered something and harnessed the dogs. He climbed into the sled and looked at me. I sat unmoving, staring at my cousin. A wolf howled in the distance. Finally Tatigaaq stepped down and dug into my pouch. He threw some sealskin-wrapped narwhal gristle toward me, which fell short. The spirit got up, retrieved the food, and dropped it in front of me.

"Thank you," I told it.

Tatigaaq brought another fur and sat down ten paces away. I didn't care about his sulking. I was thinking about how I couldn't hunt after this unless we were desperate, and that made me even madder. I squinted at the artwork, hoping somehow my spirit wisdom would wake.

Tatigaaq said, "I don't want to be here anymore. What if the spirit kills us?"

"I don't think it will. It could have hurt us anytime it wanted."

"Didn't you say it was lost? There might be more of them. You think you're such a great hunter. What if it brings more spirits here? Or what if it poisons us?"

I glared at him and said nothing.

Tatigaaq continued, "It might not *mean* to hurt us, but it might. You and I don't know."

I pretended Tatigaaq was no one. I would not speak to him. Nothing would prove the truth but what we saw. I opened my mind like a crowberry flower, ready to soak the brief summer sun. Even a flower knew winter would come again.

I watched the spirit to see what I should learn. The spirit caught my eye, and then raised its arm skyward. It dropped its arm, then repeated its gesture. The spirit pointed to the star that never moved. Maybe that was the hole in the sky's dome? That was what the Aqsarniit was: the dead playing kickball with a walrus skull, and the lights were how they marked the path to the next world. Maybe the spirit was showing me which way was home.

I couldn't figure out any more, so I simply watched and listened. Finally the spirit gave up pointing and just sat still. Occasionally it reached forward and touched its

artwork. I kept it silent company as hunters do; we are like dogs that way. We waited, though I did not know for what.

"Are you staying here?" asked Tatigaq contemptuously.

"Yes."

"I'm leaving with my dogs," he said. "You'd better come home soon or your father will be angry."

"You're supposed to kill a seal," I said. "Have you forgotten?"

"I will have better hunting another time," said Tatigaq, which was what he always said. I shrugged and turned away. Let Tatigaq do what he said he'd do. To his credit, my cousin finally honored his word, and drove off with his team. I wasn't worried. My dogs napped nearby, and the spirit was here. I didn't feel alone.

Slowly the sky faded to full night. The artwork lit the ice with a dreamy haze of colors. In the sky above, the dead had placed beautiful summer-green torches that covered the sky. They must miss this spirit who rested with me.

"Well done," I said softly to my companion. "You can go home. They'll show you the way."

I didn't think it understood me, but it bumped its head on my leg again. I picked it up and rocked it in my arms. *Maybe, I thought, maybe it won't be so bad raising babies, if I can remember this day. Maybe that's what this spirit came to tell me.* Even if I never saw it again, I'd know it was with me. I would remember everything to honor this spirit—every smell and sight and sound of my last hunt.

Suddenly the artwork lights danced in colors. A round section lifted and spun—slowly, then faster. A point emerged from the section, and sought the sky near the unmoving star. My arm hair stood up. Invisible power shook me as the humming grew louder. My whole body hummed too. The spirit jumped up and down, its hat shimmering with magic.

Overhead, something roared, and I leaped to my feet. A giant bird soared above—no, not a bird, but a huge whaling boat sailing overhead. Its curved hull covered much of the sky, as if I stood at the sea's bottom. Flames trailed in its wake. I stared, amazed, sure I was seeing the end of days. No one had taught me this; no one had prepared me. But at this sight, I thought, *How could it be otherwise? How can anyone know the truth until he sees for himself?*

A small shining ball fell from the boat's hull, then took flight on invisible wings. Despite my courage, I fell to the ground, shaking, as the object landed in front of me. I buried my face in the snow. The spirit rubbed its head on my arm. I knew it was comforting me. How funny that I should be the one needing comfort now!

And once I smiled at that thought, I knew that I had accepted this wonder into my life. I would never be the same again.

White light shone through the fur of my parka hood. I dared to raise my eyes, blinking as magical light streamed everywhere. Before me, brightness silhouetted more spirits—five of them, just like the one I'd helped. They waddled forward, picked up the artwork, and carried it into the light.

My new friend tugged my arm, catching my attention. The spirit looked up at me, moving its little fishmouth. I raised myself to one knee. The spirit tugged me forward encouragingly. It hobbled toward the light, then back to me, and pulled on my arm again.

I stared into the light, lost in its glory. What lay beyond? I knew the spirits would welcome me—that much was clear from their behavior. But what would become of me? It was hard to think. I couldn't even see my ancestors.

I closed my eyes, slowly. This light was not mine—not yet. I had to learn more before I dared visit the spirit world. I must study as a shaman, so I could walk between the worlds as I pleased, and take care of myself. I must use my fear to become strong.

I sat cross-legged on the fur. When the spirit tugged me, I smiled and petted its head. After a few more tries, the spirit extended its arms wide and rolled its head from side to side. The spirits in the light gave the same sign. I repeated what I saw, the unfamiliar gesture feeling oddly natural. I smiled as my friend limped into brightness.

The light vanished, leaving my eyes aching. When my sight adjusted, the shining ball had vanished. Only the humming boat flew overhead. With a burst of fire, the boat sailed away to another world, beyond the colorful torches of the dead. I watched it go until I saw it no more.

When the night fell silent, I slept in the iglu. In the morning, prepared for my new path, I readied my dogs and went home. ○

The Astronaut's Heart

**Untugged by gravity, the heart becomes rounder,
floating like a red balloon**

**in the antechamber of an astronaut's chest,
deformed by as much as 9.4%.**

**This we now know from ultrasound scans
conducted in space.**

**Unleashed, set free, now able to assume
whatever shape it wants,**

**the organ chooses not a square or triangle,
but a sphere,**

**as if in imitation of the world
lying blue below, like a parent's watchful eye.**

**But also pumping less efficiently now,
yet to be explored are how the heart's other duties**

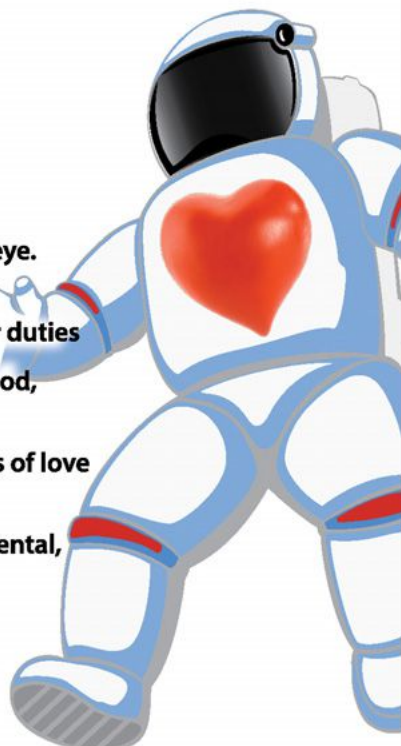
**may be affected: its ability to process fast food,
to keep rhythm, to convey oxygen.**

**And where exactly do the cardiomyopathies of love
and pi intersect in this new geometry?**

**Not to fear, however: no matter how detrimental,
once the astronauts return to Earth,**

**the heart will be crushed back to normal—
deflated, but never bitter.**

—Robert Borski



Peter Wood's previous *Asimov's* stories include "Drink in a Small Town" (March 2014) and "Butterflies" (January 2015). Peter tells us he is addicted to piping-hot doughnuts from Krispy Kreme and enjoys vacationing in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The author inherited a love of old time radio from his dad and enjoys classic programs like *Suspense*, *X Minus One*, and *Lux Radio Theatre*. Many of these interests come in handy when one is . . .

SEARCHING FOR COMMANDER PARSEC

Peter Wood

"My son listens to a radio show on a station that doesn't exist," Laura said to her friend, Trish. They were relaxing at one of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts' battered Formica tables.

Trish sipped her coffee. "It doesn't exist?"

"It existed fifty years ago."

"Huh?"

"Since Roy left, the only thing that makes Brian happy is *Commander Parsec*, this cheesy 1950s sci-fi radio show. The station's from Boone. Last night they preempted Parsec for a World Series game from 1952—"

"They rebroadcast an entire World Series game? Who'd want to listen to that?"

"Who knows? Men? I tried to find the station's phone number to see if *Commander Parsec* was coming back. WMTN Boone went off the air in 1962."

Trish hummed a few bars from the *Twilight Zone* theme. "Creepy."

"It wouldn't be such a big deal if Roy wasn't such an ass—"

Trish sighed. "Honey, I know y'all don't get along, but you have to stop obsessing."

Laura forced a smile. Even being in Raleigh's best doughnut shop—hell, North Carolina's best doughnut shop—didn't cheer her up. "You're lucky you don't have to deal with men."

Trish bit into a hot glazed doughnut. "Susan and I fight."

A siren shrieked from the parking lot. Laura fumbled in her purse and pulled out her keys. She turned off her car's hair-trigger alarm. "Somebody must have touched the car. If Roy ever paid his child support, I'd get a better one."

"Why do judges let Roy get away with not paying?" Trish asked. "I thought lawyers looked out for each other."

Laura was grateful that Trish didn't think of her as a stereotypical rich lawyer. "No, *men* look out for each other. The judges are good old boys—just like Roy."

Trish pointed to a container of mace attached to Laura's key chain. "Why don't you spray the sorry s.o.b.?"

"Don't think I haven't thought about it. If only it were legal." She laughed. "This *Commander Parsec* show is pretty ridiculous. The commander is always rescuing bimbos and defeating the bad guys all over the Galaxy."

Trish poured another plastic creamer into her coffee. "You don't believe in good guys, do you?"

"I don't believe in bad writing. Parsec's too perfect."

"Roy's an ass and this Captain Galaxy's too perfect?"

"His name's Commander Parsec and he's not real," Laura said.

"What is it you have trouble believing? The outer space stuff or that the main character's a nice guy?"

Laura shrugged. "Spacemen and decent guys are both highly unlikely to show up anytime soon." She stacked a teetering pyramid of plastic creamers. "Men are only interested in women in their twenties anyhow."

"Guys like Roy."

"That bimbo he's shacking up with looks like a high school cheerleader."

"Uh huh . . ." Trish pressed a few buttons on her phone. "Check out what Space Opera dot com says about Commander Parsec." She handed the phone to Laura and stood up. "If I'm going to act interested when Susan talks about the exciting world of home mortgages, I'm going to need more coffee."

Laura looked at the phone. The site explained that most radio dramas were broadcast live and not saved by the networks in the forties and fifties. Listeners sometimes made their own tapes, but there were no surviving official or bootleg recordings of Commander Parsec.

When Trish returned, Laura set the phone on the table beside a plastic advertisement for free doughnuts on Halloween for people in costume. "So the station and the show don't exist?"

"The show doesn't exist?"

"No surviving copies."

Trish glanced at the phone. "It says here Commander Parsec only ran for six months in 1952. It's gonna end sooner or later."

"I can't tell Brian that."

"Hmmm." Trish looked up. "A man in Boone wrote it. He insisted there was a real Commander Parsec out there somewhere. He said he based the show on short wave transmissions."

Later that night Laura heard voices from her son's room. She put down the laptop. Her prep work for the big civil trial could wait.

Brian cradled the battered boom box Roy had left behind when he'd moved out. "Commander Parsec's almost over. Can I stay up a little bit longer?"

"Sure." Sometimes she just couldn't say no to him.

The radio crackled and spat. "Commander Parsec, do you really think you can stop our photon cannon with your puny laser blaster?" a nasal voice mocked.

Laura suppressed a smile. Characters on radio dramas described everything. Parsec didn't need the villain to point out he had a weapon.

"I'll defeat your Army of Chaos, Lord Murdock," the imposing baritone of Commander Parsec proclaimed. "You won't get to that activation switch on the wall before I blast away the catwalk." Parsec paused for several seconds, as if he were counting to five Mississippi's. "Like this!"

A high pitched squeal followed.

Murdock snickered. "Knocking down the catwalk won't stop me for long, Parsec."

"Then, I'll just have to vaporize the activation switch." The same high-pitched squeal.

"You won't be smiling when my space troops arrive. You've only delayed me, Parsec. Look behind you."

Laura heard the sound of the world's noisiest army. Hundreds of feet stomped into the space station. Guns rattled and clanked.

Parsec didn't sound worried. "Hordes of Chaos troops coming through the air lock. But your nearest space base is—"

"Billions of miles away on a moon of Neptune, Parsec, but our fleet was hidden in the asteroid belt. After we lock you up on our prison transport, I'll stop by your cell and tell you how we fixed the photon cannon and destroyed Earth." The villain laughed long and hard.

Murdock's voice faded and the announcer took over. "Will Commander Parsec stop the Army of Chaos? Will Earth be saved? Tune in tomorrow at this same time on WMTN, Boone for another thrilling half hour of Commander Parsec."

A couple of days later Laura sat in her car in the pick-up lane at Brian's school. "Last night Roy didn't call again. Brian was pretty upset until *Commander Parsec* started. Sometimes I think Brian believes the show's real," she said to Trish over the phone.

Trish spoke over the sound of typing. "He's only six."

"Yeah, but still . . ."

"That guy in Boone in the fifties thought Parsec was real, right?"

"Yeah. I'd love to talk to him, but he died thirty years ago," Laura said.

A woman in a red SUV idling behind Laura tapped the horn. Laura inched forward and caressed the bumper of the BMW in front of her.

Laura's car alarm screamed like a banshee. A middle-aged man in a suit turned around and glared.

"Hell," Laura said.

"Somebody trying to steal your jalopy?" Trish asked.

"I wish somebody'd take it off my hands." Laura shut off the alarm. "I still haven't figured out where *Commander Parsec's* coming from."

"Maybe it's bouncing back."

"What?"

"The broadcasts went into space sixty years ago. Maybe they bounced back," Trish said.

"That's crazy," Laura said.

"Honey, it doesn't matter what you believe. The show's coming from somewhere," Trish said.

A teacher wearing an orange traffic vest opened the school doors. A flood of children poured outside.

Laura's head brushed against the NC State pennant on Brian's wall. Roy had gone to State before dropping out to tour with his short-lived bluegrass band. "I have some bad news." She didn't want to tell him that the show was going to end before too long, but better to let him know the truth before *Commander Parsec* just stopped.

Brian didn't respond. Instead, he turned on the radio.

A voice, not full of static like the previous nights, said, "People of Earth, um, this is Commander Parsec. I am coming to your planet to seek the Army of Chaos."

The replacement actor made no effort to sound like a space hero. Hemming and hawing, he seemed unfamiliar with public speaking. Laura envisioned him pacing

back and forth in the studio before tapping the microphone a couple of times. *Testing. Testing. Is this thing on?*

"We, ah, intercepted your signals in deep space and are grateful for your support against the Army of Chaos." The man cleared his throat. "We'll be at these coordinates on October 19, 2015."

That was tomorrow. It had to be a coincidence.

The voice paused. "Sergeant, hand me that piece of paper."

"Yes, sir," an anonymous voice in the background said.

Laura wanted to roll her eyes. So, the stage fright was part of Parsec's character now? The actor hadn't just been ill-prepared. No wonder the show went off the air.

"Mommy, can we go?" Brian asked.

Laura sighed. "Brian, it was probably a personal appearance at a grocery store or something. I bet the store's not even around anymore. Commander Parsec was on years ago."

"Please."

When the actor on the radio finally read the longitude and latitude from the paper, Laura jotted down the figures. She went to the living room to use her laptop.

The coordinates were the top of Grandfather Mountain, a state park on the Blue Ridge Parkway, about four hours west of Raleigh. Laura's trial started Monday. Brian had school. She couldn't just drop everything.

She scooped the day's mail off the cluttered coffee table and opened an envelope addressed to Brian in an unfamiliar feminine hand. It was a birthday card. A cartoon mouse wore a space suit with a goldfish bowl helmet. "Sorry I missed your birthday, spaceman."

She flipped it open. The mouse perched on top of a red cratered planet not much larger than the astronaut. He brandished a flag displaying a big wedge of Swiss cheese. "I must have been on Mars."

It was signed "Daddy and Tonya." Roy's twenty-something girlfriend had drawn a little happy face. Crammed into the card were a crumpled ten, a five, and three ones.

Laura put the money in her pocket. She'd get something nice for Brian and tell him Roy had bought it. She was so tired of Brian being disappointed.

A trip out of town might be what they both needed. The mountains were beautiful in the fall. They could go hiking and fishing, maybe spend the day at Tweetsie Railroad, the Boone Wild West amusement park Brian had loved last year. Finding out that Commander Parsec wasn't real wouldn't be such a bitter pill if he had a whole weekend to look forward to.

Laura pulled off the Blue Ridge Parkway onto Highway 221, a cracked two-lane North Carolina highway covered by a tall canopy of trees. The law firm's senior partner had given her hell about taking off in the middle of the week, but she didn't care.

She gunned the engine of her beat-up sedan. Grandfather Mountain closed at dusk and that was in less than an hour. Stuck behind caravans of tourists here to gawk at the fall colors, Laura had not made good time.

The gate attendant, a grizzled old-timer, wore a red flannel shirt under his brown Grandfather Mountain Park vest. He seemed surprised when she pulled up. "Ma'am, the park's about to close. Y'all need to just come back tomorrow."

She handed him a couple of twenties. "We're leaving tomorrow. My son wants to see the swinging bridge."

"The bridge's worth seeing, but we also got the nature center and trails. There's a real nice zoo with mountain lions and bears."

Laura drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "We need to see the park tonight."

The attendant gave her a disapproving shake of the head like she was the world's worst mother and handed her four ones. "Y'all need to be off the mountain by sundown." He sounded like he was the sheriff telling an outlaw to get out of town.

The mountaintop parking lot was empty except for a couple of maintenance trucks. With its peaked roof, the Visitors' Center resembled an Alpine ski lodge. A sign said Elevation 5945 feet. Amidst the facts about the mountain, one stood out. The highest recorded wind speed was over two hundred miles per hour.

Brian pointed to the swinging wooden bridge that crossed a chasm and led to another peak. "Let's go there. Commander Parsec would."

Laura tried to convince herself that the rickety bridge was secure. Thousands of visitors must cross it every day. It swayed in the constant wind. Every step rocked the railroad ties bolted to two steel cables.

She clasped her windbreaker close against the cold. It had been eighty when she'd left Raleigh. The top of the mountain would probably freeze tonight. She had a vice-grip on the handrail.

Wearing his mom's oversized UNC LAW sweatshirt, Brian scampered ahead, seemingly oblivious to the hundred-foot drop. Every step he took shook the bridge.

Her stomach lurched. "Wait for me," Laura called out. "It's dangerous." She suppressed a thought of old adventure movies where bridges like this always ended up cut in two when the hero was halfway across.

She didn't look down. She focused on the two hundred feet of bridge remaining and shuffled forward. Her heart pounded.

One hundred and eighty feet.

One hundred fifty.

One hundred.

Fifty.

Twenty.

She counted down the last ten steps and stepped onto the rocky pinnacle on the far side. The sun was a brilliant red and just dipping below a distant peak. The park would close very soon.

She stutter-stepped to a bench and sat down. She closed her eyes and her heart rate slowed. After a few minutes she looked around. In any direction was undeveloped federal forest, quite a contrast from urban Raleigh. Only occasional rock outcroppings—like the one she was on now—broke up the blanket of oaks and pines. The setting sun's red and orange cascaded off the tapestry of fall colors.

Brian stared at the sky.

She had to tell him the truth. This fantasy had gone on long enough. Why had she brought him here? Was she that cruel? Maybe she *was* the worst mother in the world.

Laura put her arm around Brian. "He's not coming, Brian. He's not real."

Brian just walked away.

"Honey, he's make believe." She felt sick.

Brian turned around. "Daddy'd know Commander Parsec's coming."

That hurt. She wondered if Brian was right. Roy might believe. He had always been more grounded in fantasy than reality. He could recite every planet ever visited by Captain Kirk, but didn't know how to maintain a good credit rating. Roy was an aggravating bastard, and she was better off without him, but he had a way of rolling with the punches that she admired. If reality meant all she thought about was child support and deadlines at work, was she all that much better off?

"Honey, I . . ." She stopped, not sure what to say.

"Mom, look!" Brian yelled.

A shadow raced across the valley. She looked up. Shooting out sparks, a sleek metal ship, like something out of an old black and white movie, flew toward Grandfather Mountain.

The rocket braked somehow in midair. It rotated and slowly descended before resting a few feet from the edge of the pinnacle where she and Brian watched.

The side of the ship opened.

Laura expected Parsec to have a body builder's physique and a superhero's sculpted profile. She was sure he'd be flanked by a couple of beautiful women in skin-tight uniforms.

Instead, a man wearing a rumpled silver space suit strolled down the metal gangway, as nonchalantly as if he were walking into the grocery store for a loaf of bread on the way home from work. He looked past forty and had a bit of a gut. He resembled your high school friend's dad more than a superhero.

He cleared his throat. "Commander Zack Parsec, ma'am."

Parsec couldn't be real. "I'm Laura and this is my son, Brian."

Parsec saluted Brian. "A junior spaceman. You're about my son's age."

Brian giggled.

"Where are you from?" Laura managed to say to Parsec.

"Earth, ma'am."

Then she realized *where* he was from wasn't the question. "What year?"

"2319."

"How did you get here?"

"We came through the rift."

"Rift?"

"The space rift. About thirty light-years out. Sometimes it bounces back transmissions and ships. Sometimes it sucks them up and shoots them back or forward in time. It's a navigational menace. Ships avoid it."

"But you didn't avoid it."

Parsec nodded. "The Omnivac computer gives us an edge. The Army of Chaos has infiltrated the past. We received your signals. We have orders to investigate."

Laura's head spun. A crazy-as-a-loon idea took shape. Transmissions from the future must have made it to Boone and inspired the radio show. Then the radio show's broadcast had made it to the future and got the attention of the real Commander Parsec. And then some signals bounced back to Earth and her son heard them. This was all very confusing. "But the Army of Chaos is just pretend."

"Oh, but we are very real," a voice snickered from behind her.

Parsec glared. "Lord Murdock. Show yourself."

Laura saw a flickering spot of light. It shimmered and grew until it had the rough outline of a person. It blinked and a smirking man with a neatly trimmed gray beard emerged. He wore a red uniform with an insignia of a fist clutching a ringed planet. He brandished a gun that looked like it had come from Buck Rogers' arsenal.

"Always one step behind, aren't you, Parsec?" Lord Murdock gloated. "I followed you through the rift. My ship is on the Moon. I transported down here. Thank you for leading the way."

Parsec's voice sounded hopeful "So, the Army of Chaos isn't here."

"Not yet, Parsec. When my ship returns to the future, we'll use the coordinates provided by your ship to bring the entire fleet back to this century. The Army of Chaos will overrun this primitive time and make sure Galactic Space Command never even gets started." Murdock snorted. "I used to be like you, Parsec. What a fool I was."

Parsec crossed his arms. "There are more important things than power, Murdock."

Murdock sneered. "Like family? Where's your family, Parsec?"

"My son's in good hands. He knows I love him. I pay my child support," Parsec said.

"What kind of a weakling pays child support? Not me." Murdock pulled a pulsating pen-like object out of his pocket. "And now to notify my ship to pick me up."

"Get him, Commander Parsec!" Brian yelled.

Parsec winked at Brian. "Don't worry, son. I always do. Murdock never fails to leave a way out, no matter how clever the trap."

Murdock laughed. "Not this time, Parsec. Soon Earth will be under the iron heel of the Army of Chaos. From what city shall I rule? Rome? Buenos Aires? New York?"

Behind Murdock, across the bridge, Laura saw a park ranger peering into her car window.

When the ear-piercing car alarm wailed, Murdock turned around.

Laura pulled out her keys and maced the child-support-dodging s.o.b.

Murdock howled and dropped his weapon.

Uniformed crewmen led a handcuffed Murdock up the gangway.

"We should have no trouble getting the drop on his ship," Parsec said.

"So, he won't bring his fleet back?" Laura asked.

"No," Parsec bowed to Laura. "I can't thank you enough, ma'am." He paused. "Would you and your son like a tour of our ship and maybe something more? Perhaps a quick trip around the Moon?"

"Something more?" Laura sighed. "I've just escaped a bad marriage, and I'm not about to get involved with a man who might fly off into the future and never see me and my son again. It was bad enough when Roy went to Carolina Beach to live with that waitress, Tonya."

Parsec blinked. "Roy? Carolina Beach?"

"I don't care how exciting your adventures are. I don't—"

Parsec's laugh was a bit nervous. "Take it easy."

Brian tugged on Laura's jacket. "Mom, can we go on the space ship?"

"Not now," Laura said.

Parsec brushed back his thinning hair. "Look, I'm getting over a bad relationship myself. I'm guessing Roy's your ex-husband."

"Yes," Laura said.

"Why are you mad at Commander Parsec?" Brian asked. "You're always mad."

"I'm not always mad. I'm . . ." She stopped. Maybe she was always mad. Could Brian and Trish be right? Parsec might just be a nice guy. They did exist, even if you had to wait for one to land from outer space.

She pulled her son close. "You really want to go on the ship?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"Okay." Laura reached for his hand, but Brian was already halfway up the ramp.

Holding Brian close, Laura peered out the ship's porthole at Grandfather Mountain. A couple of rangers hurried across the swinging bridge.

"We'll orbit the Moon in about ten minutes," Parsec said.

An alarm went off. For once it wasn't Laura's car.

Parsec punched a button on a wall intercom. "What's going on?"

"Murdock's overpowered a couple of guards," a voice crackled. "He just stole an escape pod and jettisoned."

"Heading for his ship," Parsec said.

"Agreed. His course will take him straight to the Moon."

"I'll be on the bridge in a couple of minutes." Parsec grinned at Brian. "With our guests."

"You'll get him, Commander Parsec," Brian said.

Laura lost her balance as the ship accelerated. Parsec caught her. "Thanks," she said.

"My pleasure," Parsec said. "And, don't worry, we'll get Murdock."

Laura knew he would. And she hoped it would be a hell of a ride. ○

NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/
NOVEMBER
ISSUE

Aliette de Bodard's October/November 2015 cover story is an enormous new novella that plunges us into a far future where various factions struggle to find the lost "Citadel of Weeping Pearls." Success will require travel through time and space. The journey could result in death, or it could give the empire the weapon it needs in a war against archenemies.

ALSO
IN
OCTOBER/
NOVEMBER

Our traditionally "slightly spooky" issue is full of outré stories of the macabre. A trio of tales makes use of English and Irish locales and lore. **Alan Smale** entices us to the West Midlands for a chilling look at "English Wildlife"; **Ian Creasey** draws us further north to York, and, then through hyperspace, to listen while a young girl spins a sinister yarn about "My Time on Earth"; and **Rick Wilber** takes us from the beaches of West Ireland to the coast of Massachusetts for one character's just rewards in "Walking to Boston." We remain in the U.S. for **Sandra McDonald's** ghostly account of "The Adjunct Professor's Guide to Life After Death"; venture to the old west for **Ian McDowell's** uncanny legend of "The Hard Woman"; and voyage through time with **Timons Esaias** to find out what happened in "Hollywood After 10." **Daryl Gregory** escorts us to another realm for a surprising twist on a familiar tale of witchcraft in "Begone"; and new author **Brooks Peck** lures us to a space station in Earth's Orbit to view the consequences of living "With Folded RAM."

OUR
EXCITING
FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's Reflections column praises "Star (Psi Cassiopeia)," a great, yet little known, nineteenth-century interstellar space opera; **Norman Spinrad's** On Books examines today's hard SF in "The Real Deal"; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net informs us that "We Have the Technology" to create the post-human era; plus we'll have an array of spooky poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy; Look for our October/November issue on sale at newsstands on September 15, 2015. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, and *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, as well as from magzter.com/magazines, Google Play, and Kobo's digital newsstand!

THE MOLENSTRAAT MUSIC FESTIVAL

Sean Monaghan

Sean Monaghan <seanmonaghan.com> currently resides in New Zealand, though he has dwelt in various locations. “The Molenstraat Music Festival” was inspired in part by his brief time living in Belgium. Sean has published numerous stories, and he was the Grand Prize Winner of the 2014 Jim Baen Memorial Writing Contest.

As he trimmed at the dying vine, Clancy saw an echo transport heading along the access road. Not many people came out this way, and certainly not riding an echo. Those that did show up at his corner of the lake usually rode animals, horses or dromedaries, or came in wagons towed by lumbering ground sloths. Doctor Symond rode a motorcycle.

Clancy kept trimming. The grape had caught some kind of fungus—Chappel’s perhaps, or just vine rot—but he figured he could save it. With some of the trimmings he might try propagating new vines.

Out on the lake some swans began hooting. There had been a cat around lately, stealing chicks and eggs. It was going to get itself killed soon, if one of the adults found it.

Clancy’s fingers ached. Arthritis, he knew. It was getting harder to straighten them out, harder to bend them. Symond had given him some pills to take, but Clancy had forgotten this morning. He wasn’t in the routine of having to remember to take a pill every morning. It wouldn’t be far off, though. At his age—eighty-seven—a regimen of daily medications impacted plenty of people. Those that didn’t have implants.

Clancy saw the echo transport would be arriving at his open gate in a couple of minutes. He folded the secateurs and took the clippings to his shaded patio, putting them into a vase of treated water. Hopefully they would suck up the antifungal and take healthily when he planted them out.

With a glance at the approaching visitors, Clancy went inside, found the pill, and washed it down with a gulp of water.

Symond was an old-school doctor, liked the less invasive methods. Still, he had suggested Clancy might want to consider implants. “Like a little webwork filigree

through your joints and tendons. It massages and dissolves build-up. It grows from a micro-stud." He'd touched the back of Clancy's hand to show where he would inject it.

The echo transport slowed as it passed through the gate opening. The flickerings of vapor swirled around it, making it look as though it were a kind of hazy ball. Momentary bolts lanced out in wide arcs, meeting the ground and shuddering staccato-like as they faded away.

As the transport slowed, the substance of the ball diminished further and he could clearly see the occupants. Two women. One older, though perhaps less than half his age, the other much younger, barely more than a girl. The girl stared at him with blank, unwavering eyes. Disconcerting, he thought.

The transport platform settled to the ground, and the vapors of the engine faded away completely. It was an older vehicle. A four-seater, with an open roof. He could see where the panels were scuffed, a couple out of alignment.

"Hello?" the older woman called. "Clancy Jonah?"

They'd parked directly in front of the patio. The girl didn't move.

"I'm Clancy," he said.

"I'm Tamsin Birchall." She stepped down from the vehicle. She was tall, thin-legged, and wasp-waisted. She'd had work done, but then everybody did these days, didn't they? She was wearing a blue, single-piece dress that seemed to wrap around her legs almost like slacks as she walked. Her hips swayed, but her shoulders stayed steady. She could be a dancer.

"I can help you?" he said. He pointed back the way they'd come. "Stay on that road for another six or seven miles, you'll come to a nice, isolated beach. The water's a long way down now, with the dry, but it's still pleasant enough. The trees grow down to the sand's edge, and there are some grassy picnic spots. Another ten miles on, up Freyberg Road, there's a rooming house."

"It's not directions I'm looking for."

"Well, I don't know that I'm much use for anything else."

Tamsin nodded. "This is a nice garden," she said. "Lush." Her nostrils flared, and she wafted her hands at her face, breathing in the scents. She blinked at him. She had moon eyes, bright and wide, with tiny irises. Her dark hair was cut in a see-saw bob, the ends all jagged, sawtooth waves that settled in perfect alignment.

"I've got infections and blight," he told her. "But I don't have much else to occupy me." He didn't mention his painting. He wasn't well known here—most of his works sold off-world—but sometimes there were people who thought him public property.

"It must be nice out here. Out of the bustle."

Clancy nodded. Kaylee was a sparsely populated planet. Fewer than six million people in a land area greater than Earth's, and only marginally smaller than Oblong and Seychel, his main markets.

Tamsin pointed at the cuttings. "Grapes?"

"Yes," he said. "The climate's a bit too cool for them here. It leaves them vulnerable. I do get a few bunches most years, but this one's infected, so I'm being ruthless. Perhaps you have a remedy?"

She shook her head. "I seem to be expert at killing plants. I can't have them in the house, it feels cruel."

"I'll think of something."

Tamsin smiled. The girl hadn't moved from the landed transport.

"You're not here to talk about my garden, though, are you?" he said.

With a glance back at the girl, the woman stepped up onto the patio. He could see that she was older than she appeared at a distance. She might even be in her fifties. "Perhaps we could talk inside."

"And leave her in the sun?" With its field turned off, the transport was simply an unshaded nest of chairs.

Tamsin turned. "Eleanor," she called. "El? Come on over."

Clancy hadn't meant that. He'd actually hoped they would leave, in a way. Company was nice, but better if it was invited company. Not someone who invited themselves, and invited themselves inside. Even attractive ones.

The girl blinked, looked at them, and got out of the vehicle. She too was older than Clancy had first thought. An adult. Not as tall as her mother—Clancy assumed the relationship—nor as lithe and elegant. Her right hand twitched as she walked over. She was dressed in dark culottes and a black blouse, gold earrings and a beaded necklace. Her hairstyle matched her mother's.

"What is it you want to talk about?" Clancy said.

The younger woman came to the patio, caught her foot on the step and almost stumbled. She caught herself and hobbled up.

Tamsin took her hand, helping her balance.

"I've got it," Eleanor said. "I'm okay." She spoke each word clearly, almost as if she'd been raised in the south, but there was a measured slowness to getting the words out. Her mother definitely sounded northern.

Tamsin let go of her hand. "Why don't you tell Mr. Jonah why we've come out here?"

Eleanor didn't respond.

"We've come from Meredith," Tamsin said.

"That's a long way." The city was two days' journey, by ground, between the lakes. An hour by air, from Parkes.

"We want to enter the Molenstraat Music Festival. Eleanor does."

The slightest flicker of Eleanor's eyes. Clancy kept watching her.

"I don't know how I can help." He did, but that was so long behind him that he would do everything he could to get them off his property.

"We need a teacher," Tamsin said.

"I'm not a teacher. I raise my garden, I walk along the lake shore, maybe walk out on the jetty and try to catch some fish. I paint." He stopped speaking.

"We know who you are," Eleanor said, with her slow crisp speaking pattern. "We know you played with the Ocatella Symphony for thirty years. We know that you taught everyone, not just in the cello, but all the strings, and then the percussion and woodwinds. You're a great music teacher."

Clancy didn't respond. Tamsin stared at Eleanor. The young woman looked around at her mother. "What?"

"Well," Tamsin said. "That's the most I've heard you say at once in five years."

"Yes."

Tamsin looked at Clancy, her gaze fixed and piercing. She took a deep breath. "Eleanor fell from a horse in 3218."

For a moment, the number meant nothing to him. An Earth date, he realized. About five years back. It was standard usage, accepted, even encouraged, but outside of the main centers most people used the zero-register from the arrival of Kaylee's first inhabitants. Kaylee's year was about fourteen days longer than Earth's. In the six hundred year history there had been occasional campaigns to align with the old planet. Ideas ranged from skipping a year every twenty-five or so to arbitrarily using the Earth calendar. Kaylee's inclination was so low, the seasons varying so little that, they argued, the missing year simply wouldn't matter.

"You're from Earth?" he said. Despite his longevity, he'd met few off-world people excepting buyers.

Tamsin shook her head. "My father liked the idea of aligning. We only had Earth calendars in the house." She managed a smile. "It's a hard habit to break."

Clancy nodded. Unusual.

He realized he hadn't acknowledged the accident. "A horse?" he said.

"She was twenty-two. Kaylee years. Out by—"

"I was twenty-two," Eleanor said. "Kaylee years. Out on the shores of Cermmanon. Three friends. I fell off and hit my head. I'm not dead. I haven't been back to the lake ever. The end." She plunked herself down in one of the patio chairs. "You should get some hydrangeas."

Tamsin lifted her hands away from her body.

"I want to see his cello," Eleanor said.

"Let me make some coffee," Clancy said. "We can talk."

Tamsin sighed, dropping her hands.

"Don't get your hopes up," he said. "Look at my hands. I can barely manage pruning, let alone hold a bow the way I used to." Clancy hesitated. "I don't play anymore," he said. "Too hard on my hands."

"But you paint," Eleanor said. "Don't lie. You can hold a paintbrush just fine."

Clancy smiled. "I do."

"And you paint very well."

"Lucky, I suppose. It's a different thing. If anything it's good for my hands."

"I find that hard to believe," Eleanor said.

"You should be more polite," Tamsin said.

"Yes I should."

"Let me get the coffee," Clancy said. "Please, sit." He indicated another of the chairs.

Tamsin nodded, sat. Clancy went inside.

Perhaps after all it was good to have company, he thought. He was becoming curmudgeonly in his aging, needed to visit more. That's what Symond would tell him. "As much about brain lubrication as anything. Work your body and work your brain. Don't let those neural networks seize up."

"House," Clancy said at the kitchen bench. "Coffee, plunged. Three cups."

"Guests?" the house's melodious voice said.

"Two."

"Big coffee drinkers?"

"Sure. Enough for six cups then. Milk, cinnamon. Chocolate on the side."

"Archerland or imported?"

"Archerland is fine." It was export quality anyway.

"Five minutes," the house said. From inside the walls Clancy heard the faintest whirring as it worked.

"On the patio, please."

"Wise choice."

Clancy returned to his guests. He pulled one of the chairs around and sat, the third corner of a triangle, still facing the garden. The grapevine looked worse from this angle.

"How do you know I have a cello?" he said. He'd almost said "What makes you think . . .", but there was no denying. Despite her strangeness, Eleanor seemed perceptive.

"I—" Tamsin began.

"I can hear it," Eleanor said. "It's in a cupboard or something." She didn't look at him. She seemed to be staring at a spot where she imagined he might put in some hydrangeas.

"Eleanor played," Tamsin said. "She was very good. Very good. But then the accident."

"The Accident," Eleanor said so that he could hear the capital letter. It wasn't just an accident, it was The Accident.

"She would have gone to the orchestra. She'd auditioned. They would have accepted her."

"Twenty-two is old to be auditioning," Clancy said. Most people were trying out before they were twenty, right out of school. If you were especially talented it would have been sooner.

"On Nialel," Tamsin said. "She'd already been in the Meredith Symphony for years."

"Oh." Clancy managed. Nialel was one of the first worlds. A place with a population of billions. "You don't mean the Nialel Bach?"

"Exactly," Eleanor said. "Then I bashed my head in."

"I never heard about it, though," Clancy said. He didn't read the press every day, but he did keep up with most music news. Someone from Kaylee getting accepted into the NBO should have rung bells around the planet.

"It was never confirmed," Tamsin said. "The accident."

Out on the lake the swans splashed, panicked. They squawked and screeched. Probably a seal coming up fast, looking for lunch.

"What was that?" Eleanor said, standing. "What?"

"Just swans." The lake inlet wasn't visible from this side of the house.

"Oh. Swans." Eleanor sat.

Clancy moved to look at Tamsin, meeting her eyes. Eleanor stared off again.

"I can't teach at that level," he said. Again, it felt like the wrong thing to say. He should have said that he couldn't teach at all. Now he'd given her a wedge. "I'd like to help, but . . . well, surely there's someone in Meredith who would take her on."

"Coffee," the house said. A slot opened in the wall, revealing a tray with the plunger, spoons, three cups and a milk jug. Also a small plate of cookies. Nice touch, Clancy thought.

Clancy retrieved the tray, placed it on the low table between the chairs. He poured.

"Sweetener?" Eleanor said. "Oh." She picked up a blue spoon and stirred it until its bowl dissolved.

"It's been hard," Tamsin said. "She loses focus. I mean, when she plays, it's good, but she wanders off, sometimes stops playing in the middle of a piece."

"Because of the injury?"

"Yes."

"I can't help with that. Perhaps some medication? Or an implant. Can't they do something with that? It's common enough with patients. Injury, mental health, even just healthy people who want regular access and education."

"Nothing's going in my head," Eleanor said.

"Honey, please."

"Nothing."

Tamsin looked at Clancy. "She refuses an implant. We know where the injured sites are. The surgeon described it to me. A couple of little microscopic spots, injected through her ear, or her eye."

"I'm listening to you," Eleanor said. "Listening."

"I understand how those procedures work," Clancy said.

"Oh," Tamsin said. "Of course, you're older, aren't you? You've probably had it done."

Clancy laughed, shook his head. "No. No Alzheimer's here. Not yet."

"Preventative," Eleanor says. She looks at him, her eyes even more piercing than her mother's.

Clancy rubbed his hands together. "I guess I'm not ready for that."

"We can pay you," Tamsin said.

"Of course."

The corners of Tamsin's mouth flitted upward. Clancy nodded to himself. She'd been expecting him to decline payment.

"If you had the procedure," Clancy said, "you'd regain your talent very quickly."

"Yes, yes."

"Don't you have power of attorney?" he said to Tamsin.

"Limited."

Eleanor sipped from her coffee. She dissolved another spoon. Tipping the cup back, she drained it and set it on the table. She stood up. "Where's the cello?" she said. "Let me show you."

"Let's keep talking a while," he said.

"Sure." She stomped by him and went through the front door.

Tamsin set down her own coffee. "Eleanor. Back here."

But she'd gone.

Clancy followed her in. He found her standing in the center of the living room, staring at the painting above the fireplace.

"I didn't invite you in," he said.

"Yes you did." She didn't turn to face him. "You own a cello. That's an invitation."

In a way he kind of liked her smart-alecky oddness. Limited inhibitions.

"Nice painting," she said.

It was one he'd never sent for sale. Sunset across the lake, the patterns of light wiped across the sky and reflected in the lake's rippled surface. Some swans paddling in the foreground, and seals on a rock, looking around, surprised once again that the day was over.

"It's very vivid," Eleanor said. "My therapist said I should try painting."

"It's soothing," he said.

"You must make a lot of money."

"How so?" Clancy heard Tamsin come up behind him.

"Selling these," Eleanor said. She turned to face him.

Clancy nodded. "I sell a few."

"Big money?"

"I do all right." Perhaps she was a bit *too* forthright.

"Gorgeous," Tamsin said.

But Eleanor had moved on from the oil. She walked across the living room and pulled open the cupboard.

"Hey," Clancy said. He took a couple of steps.

"It's all right." Eleanor took the case out and laid it on the floor. She flicked open the catches and lifted the lid.

Light from the windows sparkled off the cello's polished surface.

"Oh my," Eleanor said. She took the instrument out, with its bow, and balanced it on the endpin. "This is a very lovely instrument. A Podjurski."

"It's from Nialel," Clancy said. "Very expensive. How did you find it?"

"I heard it. I told you that. It didn't want to be in a cupboard. May I?"

"Now you're asking permission?"

Eleanor didn't respond. She stared at him. Not at him, he thought, but through him. No one said anything. Tamsin took a couple more steps into the room, looking at the painting.

It's become a contest, Clancy thought. The pair of us, both waiting for the other to back down. He wanted to tell her to put it away, to get her greasy, dirty hands off his wonderful cello. But he also wanted to hear her play, hear if she was as extraordinary as the story suggested.

"You painted this?" Tamsin said.

Clancy kept watching Eleanor. She broke off, looked at the other door, lifted the cello and walked through to the back of the house.

"Hey," Clancy said, as Tamsin said, "It's very good."

Clancy glanced at her. She was still staring at the oil. "Thanks," he managed before following Eleanor and his cello.

She'd gone right through to the sunroom and pulled a chair up to the big windows. As Clancy came in, she was just settling down with the cello between her legs.

"What are you doing?" he said. He went right around and stood directly in front of her.

"You have a nice view," she said. She took the bow and tuned the cello.

Quickly.

She made a single pass, lowered the bow, turned each of the pegs and played a scale. It had been badly out of tune—from years in a cupboard—but she'd been immediately able to get it in tune without even a second pass.

Clancy stepped back. The young woman knew the instrument. Better than he ever would.

"Oh my," Tamsin said, coming into the room. "Your painting is from here."

Clancy glanced at his easel. "This is where I paint." He lifted his index finger to his lips. "Let me listen."

Eleanor played a couple more scales. "Nice timbre," she said.

She played a long part of Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 3, segueing into Jourdain's *The Butterfly Sings Silently*, followed by Andrea's Suite 13, a piece that usually was played on oboe, but with the way she played, seemed as if it belonged to strings. To the cello.

The hair on Clancy's neck stood on end.

There was nothing he could teach her.

Tamsin folded her arms and leant back against the doorframe.

Eleanor shifted to Shirakawa's *Sonata for Yuki*, playing softly with a controlled legato and letting the volume and tempo increase in a way Shirakawa might have imagined, but knew would be rarely realized.

As she came to the gigue, Eleanor stopped.

Clancy jumped. The sudden silence was unsettling. The piece played on in his head, but Eleanor just stared at the ground.

"See," Tamsin whispered.

Eleanor looked up. "This sure is a small house."

"Four rooms," Clancy said. He felt shaken and unnerved by the natural power of her playing.

He knew musicians often were caught up in a piece, to the exclusion of the world around them. Sometimes he had that feeling now as he painted. With her, though, it was as if there were a switch that turned that off and brought her back to the present as though nothing had happened. As if she hadn't been playing at all.

He remembered himself the elation that came from playing with a fervor that elevated him like some kind of drug. The effects lingered. He'd never come out of that state to make an inane and unconnected observation the way she had.

"If you're going to teach me," she said, "I'm going to need somewhere to stay. Parkes is too far away."

Clancy looked at Tamsin. "I can't teach her.

Tamsin stayed where she was. She licked her lips.

"You need an implant," Clancy said to Eleanor. "Your playing is extraordinary. No wonder you were auditioning for the NBO."

Eleanor looked around at Tamsin. Her mother nodded at her.

"I stopped, didn't I?"

Clancy nodded. "But aside from that, fantastic. There's nothing I can do."

"I need to train through it."

"You need something medical. Probably. It's not something I can help with. I could teach you if you were six years old and had never picked up an instrument. I would love to do that. Such talent." He leaned back against the glass, annoyed with himself

again. He'd admitted that he would teach, even if not her. That would be just the opening Tamsin could use to force the wedge.

"Right now, you're so far beyond what I can do," he said. "It's outside my area of expertise."

"Implants mess with you," Eleanor said. "There's too much noise. You should see my friends. You ask them a question and they go blank for a split second, then they know. What's the difference, percentage-wise, of the land area of Nialel compared to Oblong? Quick, answer."

"What?"

"Who was the fourth daughter of the second president of Verlain after the second dynasty?"

Clancy looked at Tamsin. Was the girl having an episode?

Tamsin shrugged.

"There's too much noise." Holding the cello's neck, she stood. "I wouldn't be able to concentrate."

"How do you know? Anyway, it doesn't have to be a full implant. Just enough to stop the fugue. Or the break, or what have you."

"Fugue is good," Eleanor said. "Perfect."

"Someone in Meredith could do it."

"No one," Eleanor said, "is putting anything in my head." She sat down and misfingered, drawing the bow across a discordant set of notes.

"I . . ." Clancy trailed off. They weren't going to leave with a no, he thought.

"She needs someone like you," Tamsin said. "Someone inspiring."

"Three hundred and fifty marks," he said. Perhaps making the price unattainable would make them rethink. "Per day. Two hours of lessons"—he didn't know what he would teach—"and two hours of practice. She has to walk on the beach, too, to get out of the house."

"Three hundred," Eleanor said. "Two and a half hours of lessons."

Well, that hadn't worked.

"Where will she stay, though?" Tamsin said. "I imagined you having more space."

Clancy sighed. "I'll have the house realign. It'll add on a few rooms. I guess that Mom wants to stay too?"

Eleanor's face brightened. "That would be fabulous."

The vine had died. Clancy saw that he'd taken too much off, the rest too infected and weak to go on. And none of the cuttings were showing signs of taking at all. He would have to get to Parkes and see if he could get a new vine. It would be a couple of years before any grapes came in now. He would miss eating them.

He took his bicycle out through the garden and along the forest path, heading for the jetty. The smell of the pines immediately drew him away from the house, out into the wilderness. The bike rattled as it bumped over roots and divots in the well-worn trail. Squirrels scampered out of his way. One of the black-and-white-striped cats lay curled on a stump.

It was ten days until the Molenstraat Music Festival, and he couldn't imagine that Eleanor would be ready. She'd practiced as agreed, and walked, and listened to recordings, and read his whole stack's worth of music theory books. She'd read everything she'd had time and concentration for. Biographies of Mozart and McCartney and Tulappain. The history of music and the history of art. She devoured books, but wasn't so good at retention.

As he came around into view, he saw Eleanor sitting at the end of the jetty. She dangled her feet out over the water. In the time since she'd arrived here—two months—the lake had dropped a further three feet.

The forecasters said rain was coming, but it might be weeks away. The southern ocean was gyring again, and the warmer waters were moving back into the currents. The air was swelling with northbound clouds. Eventually, the predictions said, the moisture-laden air would traverse the land and fill the watershed again. Clancy had been around long enough to know that it would happen, though maybe not as quickly as the meteorologists might hope.

He put his bicycle against the post at the head of the jetty and started down. Some coots paddled in with the swans, and a group of egrets walked in the muddy shallows, heads darting down for the guppies and carp.

"Hello," Eleanor said as Clancy walked to her. "I think the lake's running out of water."

She said this most days, whether out here or on the forest trail or in the practice room. It was usually the first thing she greeted him with.

"I think the lake's got a lot more water than we know."

"The top half is gone," she said, looking around now. That was new.

"Half?"

"Look down," she said.

Clancy looked. He saw that the last of the jetty's supporting posts met the lakebed at the same place as the water's surface. Perhaps this was why the vine had died. He watered it regularly, but it was still a stressful time. So dry.

"See?"

"That's fifteen feet from high water," he told her. "The lake's three hundred feet deep at its lowest point."

"Think of it like a cone," she said. "Inverted. Most of the volume is in the top few feet. Every foot down, there's less and less."

"It will rain soon. I've got pancakes." The house had made them as soon as he'd gotten up.

"Maple syrup?"

"Just like every day. Where's your mom?" Clancy sat beside her.

"At the house."

Tamsin hadn't been there when he'd left. It wasn't like her to vanish that way. She did take long walks through the forest, but rarely without letting them know. He hoped that she'd just gone into Parkes.

Tamsin had settled in. She'd negotiated the payment, in exchange for gardening, maintenance, and supply trips to Parkes. Very shrewd, he thought. On the first day he'd wanted them to leave almost right away, but every day that passed they were more and more embedded. Affixed, as if with a glue that was curing harder and harder every week.

At least, he thought, knowing it was a grumpy, curmudgeonly thought, they would leave soon for the festival.

Not that Eleanor would be ready. Despite himself, he was disappointed in himself for failing her.

Clancy set the coarse tea towel down and unwrapped the pancakes. He took the syrup bottle from his pocket and handed it to her.

The jetty was an extension of the house, constructed from the same grown materials. Its surface looked similar to the house's floorboards, but was rougher.

"Today," she said, pouring, "I'm going to play Brahms's Cello Sonata No. 1 right through." She rolled up the pancake and put one end in her mouth.

"That's great," he said. Fifty-five days of lessons, he thought, and they were no closer. She could read a score once and know it perfectly—she never played with the score in front of her—but she still had dropouts. Nothing he could do was going to fix that, despite the incremental improvements that Tamsin noticed.

Sometimes Eleanor would play four or five pieces, segueing perfectly, as she had that first day, but mostly she faltered much sooner.

Occasionally Clancy had suggested the medical path again. He thought it was worth another go.

"Ten days," he said. He poured syrup on the next pancake and rolled it.

"I'll be ready," Eleanor said. "I want to do duMarrier's *Eagle Music*."

"That's a tough piece."

"I know."

Across the inlet a seal surged up out of the water onto an exposed rock. The animal barked, flopped along, then lay down, its pink mouth wide open. Rivulets ran away from its body. Clancy could see more seals in the water nearby, their heads bobbing as they looked around.

"I'm glad you built the jetty on this side," Eleanor said. "The seals stink."

She was right. All the oils and hair and skin that the seals shed in their sleeping spots baked in the sun and gave off a disgusting odor. They were progressively moving down the rocks—which they preferred to the muddy beach side—leaving a trail of stinky, abandoned sleeping hollows.

"I didn't build the jetty." He'd told her this before. It had been here when he'd bought the place.

"I wish I could paint or something," she said. "I wish I was creative like you."

Clancy was taken aback. How could she not see how creative she was? He told her.

Eleanor shook her head. "I play well, I know that."

"You play exceptionally."

"But it's just the notes, the spiccato or whatever, the tempo. That's all. It's like math."

"Who told you that?"

Eleanor shrugged.

"The way you play is stunning," Clancy told her. "I get what you say about the notes, but it's always more than that. It's the way you come at the notes. The way you bow, the energy you have, the concentration. Your performances are unique."

"Yes. Uniquely truncated," Eleanor said with a laugh.

"It takes creativity to play the way you do, believe me."

Eleanor looked away, unconvinced.

"Any donkey with half a brain can run a bow across a cello's strings. I can play well, but with you, I know there's something special."

She gave him a smile, humoring him. "You don't think I'm ready, do you?" She took another pancake. The syrup ran out between her fingers.

Clancy found the pack of wet cloths and passed it to her. "Sorry," he said.

"What if I don't worry about it?" she said. "Maybe in front of an audience I won't falter."

"Do you think that's possible?" He took a bite of pancake and said, "There's something about being on the stage."

"I know. I remember. Do you get that with painting?"

"Painting is a solitary experience," he said. "There's no audience, no one to cheer you on or buoy you with the reverent silence."

Eleanor laughed. "I'd like to play for an audience again. I miss it."

He understood. He missed it himself. But this was what he had chosen.

Eleanor lowered her head. "Maybe Mom's right. Maybe I should just get the implant?"

Clancy didn't reply. His hands hadn't gotten any better. The medications he took—some anonymous steroids and balms from the southern honey snapper glands—helped a lot, but it was a progressive disease. Eventually he would lose the effective use of his hands altogether.

He stretched his arm out, level with his shoulder, fingers splayed as far as the knobby joints would allow. He wondered how long it would take for Symond's hand implant to improve the functioning if he got one.

It was a very different thing, he knew, to having something in your head, but he was resistant, just as she was.

"That's why you get tired playing," Eleanor said, looking at his half-ruined hand. "You should take a pill right before we practice together."

"Yeah, I don't think it works like that."

After the first week, when it was clear the pair were settling in, he'd ordered another cello. It was a Domdom, a cheap, generic print-clone, but it was adequate for her. She made it sound almost as good as the Podjurski. Tamsin had collected it on one of her trips to Parkes.

Sometimes he and Eleanor had played together. He discovered then that she would be able to play for longer while he played too, but he ran out of energy. Hands aching, he would have to stop, and then moments later, she would too.

Eleanor took a pancake and threw it out over the water at the seals. The pancake spun like a discus, almost hovering as it sped out. After fifty yards the air caught it and it buckled and, glide lost, tumbled to the water. Half of the bobbing seals disappeared. One popped up moments later, the pancake in its mouth.

Eleanor laughed.

Clancy heard something from beyond the trees. An artificial sound. An echo transport coming along the access road.

"Mom," Eleanor said. She got to her feet. She ran back along the jetty, the boards rattling as she went.

Clancy shook his head. At least they were still paying him, even the reduced fee on barter. He didn't need the money, but he wasn't going to let them freeload.

He tossed a few more pancakes out for the seals, wrapped the rest and started back for the house. When he arrived, the flickerings of the echo transport were just dying away.

Far off across the plain, perhaps ten miles, a column of black roiling smoke rose from a grass fire. Overhead an altitude echo chopper swam through the smoke, spraying a glistening pink mix of water and retardant. There were more fires these days, but all quickly doused.

Clancy leant the bicycle against the house and went inside. The house was cooking lunch, enchiladas from the smell. At least he was still able to get tomatoes and cilantro from the garden.

He found the others on the balcony outside the front room.

In reconfiguring to accommodate his guests, the house had added the balcony, in addition to the two upstairs bedrooms, a bathroom, and a sitting room, also overlooking the lake. Clancy kind of liked the additions and thought he might keep them after. It wasn't taxing the house any.

"Clancy," Tamsin said as he stepped out with them.

"Good morning." He saw Dr. Symond at the corner of the balcony. "You brought a guest."

"I did."

Symond turned around and smiled. "How're you doing, old codger?"

"Fine. Don't you have patients?"

The doctor shrugged. "It was my day off. I usually play eighteen holes, but they've closed the course until the rains get here."

"The shire council declined their extended water rights," Clancy said.

"Good," Eleanor said. "The lake's half gone already."

"I don't think watering a few greens will impact the lake so very much," Symond said.

Tamsin's face fell. "Please, Doctor. I need you to be on her side."

Symond nodded. "Excuse me. Every drop counts." He managed to make it sound sincere. "Nice piano," Symond said, pointing through the windows into the sunroom.

The house had made a piano so Clancy could accompany Eleanor on some pieces. His damaged old hands struggled with some chords, but even when he played, she would still falter.

"What's this about?" Clancy said. He had a feeling he knew.

"Sam's the best doctor in Parkes," Tamsin said.

"I'm aware." There were only thirty or so anyway. Parkes wasn't a very big town, and Symond was the only one who'd spent any real time at a big city clinic. And he'd been a surgeon for almost a decade before opting for the lower stress and quieter life in the provinces. He was a friend and visited from time to time.

"Let me take a look at your hands," Symond said. He walked over and took Clancy's raised right hand. "Not bad. You're taking the medication?"

"He paints too much," Eleanor said. She'd moved right to the corner of the balcony. She had Clancy's binoculars and was watching the seals.

"I take it," Clancy said. "If I don't you're going to get me all microed up, right?"

"I will."

"And that's why you're here?"

Symond didn't reply.

"It's ten days until the festival," Tamsin said. "And she's no better."

"I'm fine," Eleanor said. "I'm bored with being in the country."

Clancy smiled. She was just saying that to antagonize her mother. Eleanor loved it here.

"Good," Tamsin said, antagonized. "Because your father's money isn't going to last forever."

"You want me to talk to her?" Symond said.

"About what?" Eleanor said. She lowered the binoculars and looked back at the three of them. "Oh," she said.

"The festival is your opportunity. There's the prize, but also the scouts. If you do well, you'll be able to try out for the orchestra."

"The Meredith Symphony," Eleanor said, enunciating the words, speaking quickly and clearly in a way Clancy had never heard before.

"The NBO," Clancy said.

Symond nodded.

Eleanor's face went blank. Exactly as she'd appeared the first time he'd seen her. Clancy hadn't noticed how much she'd changed. She'd become more animated over the weeks, he now realized.

"I'm never playing for the NBO," she said. "We know it." She walked away from the rail and handed Clancy the binoculars as she went by.

"Honey," Tamsin said. "Honey."

Eleanor didn't reply. She went off up the stairs. Clancy heard her door slam.

Tamsin's shoulders slumped. She went to the rail and leaned against it. "We have to leave in a couple of days. She's not ready."

"I can't perform a procedure against her will," Symond said.

"I know that!" Tamsin said. Clancy jerked at the vehemence in her voice.

Symond said nothing.

Tamsin continued to stare across the lake. The sun glinted back off the surface. A small flock of egrets circled and dropped to the water's edge near the house.

"Sorry," she said, barely audible. "I just can't keep this up."

Looking at Clancy, Symond held his hands out, his expression perplexed. "What can I do?" he said.

"Nothing," Tamsin said. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

"No waste," Symond said. "It's okay to get out into the country. I like what Clancy's done to the place. It always felt a bit cramped before."

Clancy nodded. "You could stick around if you like, join us for lunch. It would be good for Eleanor."

"Good for her?" Tamsin said.

"Yes. So long as you—both of you—stop trying to convince her that she should get an implant."

No one spoke. Out across the lake a seal barked. It fell silent too, for a moment, then the whole group of them set up a cacophony of barks. Clancy looked over and saw a flock of swans dip down close and sail away again. Mocking the seals, taunting them. Mostly the seals just ate the lake fish, but would take a cygnet, or even an adult, if they could get one.

"I'll ask her," Clancy said.

Tamsin nodded.

"Okay," Symond said. "I'll stick around. Did I smell something Latin?"

"Enchiladas, I think," Clancy said. "They're on the rotation."

He went inside, past his easel and the cellos, and up the stairs. He knocked on Eleanor's door.

"Go. Away." Sometimes she was like an eight-year-old. He put some of that down to the physical injury, some of it just down to her. Of course she'd been special and revered when she was younger, of course she would have some prima donna in her.

"The doctor is going to stay for lunch."

"Who cares?"

"Enchiladas," Clancy said. That would get her to join them.

She didn't reply. Clancy went back down.

"A little early for lunch?" Symond said.

Clancy checked the time. "Another hour, I guess. You didn't eat already, did you?"

Symond shook his head. "Got out of the breakfast habit years ago. I like this new painting."

"Want to buy it?" Clancy had already given Symond one of his smaller works for the surgery wall.

"Sure. Offworld prices?"

"Sorry. It's a commission for the Sultan of Sikarra."

The painting was a four-foot-wide, three-foot-high, oil of the lake—but with a full to the brim surface, and it was surrounded by lush forests. The seals looked happy and the swans kept their heads raised.

They talked for a while, Clancy careful to keep Tamsin away from the topic of Eleanor's issues. Symond talked golf and swimming, and the state of his practice.

"Not enough doctors these days," he said. "The kids, they train, then they want to be big-time surgeons in the city."

Clancy heard footfalls on the stairway.

"When's lunch?" Eleanor said, coming into the room.

"Soon," Tamsin said.

"Would you play something for me?" Symond said.

Eleanor squinted at Clancy and Tamsin. "Trying to get me to trip up, huh?"

"We didn't suggest it," Clancy said, as Tamsin said, "Oh, honey."

"I'd like it," Symond said. "I've not heard you yet. Apparently you're quite good."

"Quite good!" Eleanor said. She went straight across to the chair, picked up the cello and the bow and began to play.

The deep notes thrummed through the sunroom. The fingers on her left hand, spread like spider legs, danced from string to string, wobbling to give a hint of tremolo. She bowed higher, faster.

"This is very old," Symond whispered. "Khachaturian? The Russian?"

Eleanor threw the bow, adding a jeté. Invented by her in the piece, but perfect.

"Kodaly," Clancy whispered back. "Sonata Opus eight. This is a treat. Not many people play this one. Not many can."

Eleanor slowed. Her bowing slackened. A couple more passes and the bow slipped to the floor.

Her eyes glazed.

Tamsin drew a sharp breath. Symond nodded.

Eleanor stared away into the distance for another few moments. She blinked, looked at Clancy. "When's lunch?" she said.

"About now," Clancy said. He went back into the kitchen.

Clancy set out the plates on the balcony table. The house unfurled the sun membrane to shade the table. Tamsin brought the big pot of bean mix and Eleanor separated the tortillas. Symond set out the glasses.

Symond caught Clancy on a trip to the kitchen, filling a carafe with water for the meal.

"She's very good, isn't she?" the doctor said.

Clancy nodded. "Extraordinary."

"But she'll never get to play in an orchestra."

"And the pity of that is that she would be fine in an orchestra, I'm sure. She's played with me and never loses focus. But I tire quickly."

"Have you tried recordings? I mean, orchestral works with the cello parts stripped out."

"It's not the same," Clancy said. He shut off the water and set the carafe on the bench. "I have a lot of recordings, that's for sure. We listen to them, and she's tried playing. And like you say, I got the house to strip out the cello, but it's just not the same as playing live."

"Theater experience? Maybe your house could make a kind of simulation. I could get you some enhancement contact lenses for her. That might work like an implant."

"A little. The house is nearly as old as I am, I guess. She's not really up to that kind of simulation thing."

"We could try in town."

"The festival's in ten days." Clancy picked up the carafe, meaning to head out to the balcony again. "Tamsin would try anything, but Eleanor's very straightforward."

"It would be the best thing for her," Symond said. "Mixing with other young, brilliant musicians."

"Yet because of this, what you saw, she'll never get the opportunity."

Symond rubbed his chin. "I might go with them," he said. "See if I can . . . well, do something."

Clancy frowned. Symond was a good doctor, but he had patients here to tend to.

"I'll get a locum, of course," Symond said as if hearing Clancy's thought.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Can you imagine her on the stage if she—"

"She won't get on the stage if she doesn't feel ready."

"I just meant—"

"Come have lunch." Clancy put his hand on Symond's shoulder.

Symond smiled. "I guess you know what's best."

Clancy arrived in Meredith two days before the festival. He'd flown a commercial echo liner that arced up in a long, elegant parabola, the fuselage staying level the whole time.

The views across the lakes had been stunning. Though from his home at the inlet Lake Andronne seemed so depleted, from eight thousand feet in the air it appeared endless and vital. The surface area was still over a quarter of a million square miles, even at its low level.

And Cermmanon, bigger and darker than its sister, spread out beyond the horizon.

The land was brown, desiccated. Clancy saw frequent blackened patches where grass and forest fires had occurred. On the trip, he'd seen two aircraft hovering and dousing active blazes.

Meredith lay on almost a direct line between the two lakes from Parkes. The isthmus that separated the lakes from each other narrowed to as little as six miles in some parts. The beaches on both had been littered with umbrellas, looking from his height like the dots of tiny sequins.

When the craft landed, a sweep from the echo lofted him through the terminal, splitting him from the other passengers. He slipped to his feet in the arrival hall, in a line of moving people heading for a taxi rank.

A stalkeye glanced at his passport and squinted through his luggage. It directed him to stand number three.

The taxis were all wheeled and driven by engines. The interior smelled of sweat and bad food. Clancy saw some wrappers on the floor that might have come from burgers or burritos.

On the road, traffic buzzed and blared. Some great striding thing stepped over them; a vehicle on stilts surging through the jammed up ground vehicles. On a fly-over he saw traces of the echo effect, the wisps and clouds forming and dissipating.

Meredith was a city with a population of over one hundred thousand, but it was spread out across more than three hundred square miles. People had to travel great distances sometimes.

He was in the heart of the city here, where distances were short and wheels were adequate.

Through the grimy window he saw the tall buildings, some with as many as fifteen stories. Their curving lines intersected in blues and greens, mimicking the country flowers everyone missed so much.

He asked the taxi to go by the concert hall on Molenstraat. The vehicle asked for another fifty, and Clancy accepted.

They turned onto a wide, tree-lined boulevard. It took Clancy a moment to recognize it. Molenstraat. Things had changed so much. Different buildings, a different pattern of ground traffic.

The building stood like something ancient, as if it had been transported from Earth block by block. It had six thick stone pillars, rifled with sharp, tight helixes from plinth to capital. Wide steps rose up thirty feet to the main floor, and the building's façade was set back from the pillars, dark and mysterious.

Despite its apparent age, the building hadn't been here during his years. He couldn't remember what had been on the site, but felt sure it had been less imposing than this edifice.

The traffic carried them on. The taxi deposited him at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, region three. Inside, a stalkeye on wheels welcomed him into the lobby and arranged his accommodations.

In the room, Clancy stripped and showered and rested on the bed. Once, he reflected, he could have traveled across the continent and begun sightseeing immediately. Now, though, his weary bones needed some recovery time.

When he woke, it was already growing dark outside, so he ate and watched some documentaries on the expanded strip.

He kind of wanted to call Eleanor and Tamsin. And kind of didn't. They'd left the same day Symond had visited, and left the house feeling vacant and hollow. He hadn't been able to reconfigure it to the old layout, even though that had once been his plan.

Eleanor had just inserted herself into the place too much.

She was everywhere he looked. In the comments she made about the paintings, in the way the seals moved, in his old cello, still leaning against the empty chair.

The next morning he got out for a walk. The hotel had given him a sheet with a walking tour that took him through some of his old neighborhoods. It was strange to see the new buildings retrofitted over the old. Places he remembered—the old Barry cottage, the Clerestory restaurant—that had seemed so permanent and immovable were so altered with modern elements that it was only the location that told him what they were. It was strange to see the restaurant, somehow retaining its name although the high windows had been filled, the atrium closed off with an inserted second floor. He felt like a stranger. A genuine tourist.

He ate lunch at the Clerestory, the menu so modern and diverse he struggled. He ordered a sandwich.

As he walked on, he kept seeing Eleanor in the other pedestrians. But then a girl would turn her head, clearly not his student. He was not used to so many people all at once.

Back at the hotel, he toyed with calling them again. He was worried about her, more worried than he thought he should be. He had a sense that she would do fine. He remembered being on the stage himself: so often it was like something transcendent. Everything seemed to fade away except for the music and an awareness of the audience. He could become caught up in practicing, but in a concert hall the audience elevated the experience.

He hoped the same happened with Eleanor. He remembered talking with her about it.

She missed having an audience.

He used the hotel phone to call. They would be at home, he knew, preparing, perhaps arguing. Tamsin would still be trying to convince her to try the implant.

Clancy remembered Symond describing it after lunch that day. It acted fast. A kind of microscopic biological machine. It would grow through her brain, forging new connections between the neurons. It would read her, as it burrowed, look for where there was scar tissue and damage. Smart enough to theoretically do no damage and to stop when its job was done.

"It's standard procedure," Symond had said. "Most brain-injured people have it done."

But the doctor couldn't promise that "no damage" meant she would still be musical. Many people changed.

"I've read about it," Eleanor said, her words forming precisely and individually. "People lose their limbs and gain their speech and their sight and ability with math and all that, but they're different. They used to like clam chowder, and now the meal makes them sick. They could ski like a rocket, but now they're afraid of snow. Yay for being able to order in a restaurant without making a fool of yourself, but who cares if I lose interest in the cello?"

"It's unlikely," Symond had said.

"I've tried to tell her," Tamsin had said. Later, after they'd packed up lunch, she'd come to tell Clancy they were leaving. "We need to get back. The festival's in ten days. She can at least go to the preliminaries."

"She might find an audience," Clancy had told her. "That will be a big help."

"You've been a big help. Listen to her talk. She barely spoke when we got here and now listen to her. Not perfect, but so much more articulate."

"It's playing, I guess. Playing the cello so much."

"And you, of course. I wish you could come. To the festival. It would mean a lot to her."

"It's an awful long way."

Tamsin had understood, but now here he was.

The phone was still ringing, and he waved at it to break the call. They weren't at home.

The next morning he lined up for a ticket to the first round of the festival. The crowds were bustling, the line slow. Most people, he saw, had tickets already, bought weeks ago.

The array of costumes and hats on display was overwhelming. There seemed to be a penchant for clashes: purples with blues, yellows with pinks. Feathers and sashes and living sleeves that pecked and squawked from women's elbows.

There were tiers to the festival, from the formal evening shows with the full orchestra and offworld acts to the talent shows and a series of open auditions. Clancy imagined the audiences at the audition sessions being primarily made up of family and friends.

On the festival guide he found Eleanor's name. She wasn't in the auditions at all. She'd been placed in the local musicians section.

She was going to perform Haydn. Concerto in C Major.

Clancy felt his breath catch.

Not an easy piece at all. Even for someone as gifted as she.

He could picture it, watching her work through the piece, gaining momentum, hitting the notes perfectly but with inspiration, making the audience gasp, even weep. She would play with a fervor and energy few had seen.

Then she would falter.

He liked to believe it wouldn't happen, but he'd lived with her for weeks.

Returning to the hotel, he called again. Still no reply. He tried the SeekMe service, trying to track them down, but the service did not have them on record.

Back at the concert hall he found a stalkeye and had it find him an official.

"Help you?" the woman said. She was in her thirties, in a freshly dry-cleaned uniform that should have been replaced. It was worn at the seams, and the epaulets were too tangled.

"I'm looking for Eleanor Birchall," Clancy said.

"Performer?"

Clancy nodded.

"Backstage." The woman squinted at him. "But you don't have a pass, do you?"

"I was her teacher, for a while."

"And you wanted to wish her well?"

"Yes." Clancy was aware of the throngs around him, still in the gaudy colors, still preening and showing off. He was sure that it hadn't been this ostentatious when he'd been on other occasions. He had spent a lot of time in the city over the years, but hadn't been back in almost two decades.

The woman beckoned and led him across the huge foyer, across the tiled floor. Clancy saw images of fish and seals underfoot as he followed.

They came to a booth beyond the wide curved stairs that led to the balcony levels. The woman—Clancy glimpsed her nametag: Sarah-Lyn—rapped on the roller panel that closed off the booth's counter. A stalkeye reached out of the side, and the roller door slid up.

Inside an old man—older than Clancy—sat on an office chair in the glow of a bank of displays.

"Backstage pass for this gentleman," Sarah-Lyn said. She looked at Clancy. "You'll have to answer a bunch of questions, I'm sorry. Good luck." She turned and walked away, waving at Clancy's "Thank you" without looking around.

"Performer you're with?" the old man said.

Clancy explained and found himself in a negotiation. The man called the dressing room, then told Clancy to wait. Clancy wished that he'd been able to get hold of the women from the hotel. It would have been much easier.

"Someone's coming out for you," the old man said. "You can wait over there."

Clancy thanked him and went to sit on a bench seat under a vast tapestry that showed the colonization of Kaylee, the first remote probes and explorers, the huge dropspace ships, the first cities. It made him feel tiny.

The glistening crowd milled and chattered around him. People filed into one or another of the halls for various shows.

Clancy heard someone call his name. He looked up.

Symond.

What was he doing here?

The doctor moved sideways through a surge of people.

"Come, come," Symond said, gesturing for Clancy to follow.

Clancy got to his feet. By the time he reached the doctor, the crowd had thinned and he was able to proceed in a civilized manner.

"You came," Clancy said.

"They asked." Symond turned and headed for a corridor.

"Did you give her an implant then?" Clancy said. "Did you talk her into it?" He felt angry, angrier than he would have expected. He'd become attached to Eleanor. Too quickly. He didn't want to see harm come to her.

"Nothing like that," Symond said. "I don't get to Meredith often enough: this was an opportunity to visit. And I'll enjoy the festival."

"But you're with them," Clancy said, biting back his annoyance. He knew he should have come with them. He wanted to tell Symond to keep away, to never harm the girl.

"As a guest." Symond stopped and put his hand on Clancy's.

Clancy decided he was getting a new doctor when he returned home.

"It's true, though," Symond said. "Tamsin, I'm sure, did invite me in case she managed to convince Eleanor at the eleventh hour. You know, the pressure of having to go on stage might make her relent."

"And here you are." Clancy pulled his hand away.

"But I wouldn't do it. You know that?"

"Where's the dressing room?" From the distance, muffled, Clancy heard an overture. Wagner? he wondered. The piece was unfamiliar.

Symond started walking again. It took a few moments before he spoke. "If Eleanor did agree, I would make her wait a few days, at least. Cooling off period."

"Huh." Clancy was not impressed.

"By which time she would change her mind anyway. The festival would be over. An implant wouldn't affect the outcome of that."

They walked on in silence. The path to the dressing rooms seemed labyrinthine. The building was even bigger than it appeared from the outside.

Three levels down, along a narrow cinderblock corridor lined with doors, Symond knocked and took the handle to slide it open.

Eleanor was sharing the room with two other young women. She sat staring into the mirror while her mother applied make-up around her daughter's eyes.

Tamsin looked up. "Clancy," she said.

Eleanor sprang out of the chair. She almost bounced off the mirror and jumped at Clancy. He staggered back at her embrace, and Symond put his arm around Clancy's shoulders, steadying him.

"You came. You came. You came," Eleanor said, arms wrapped around his neck. "Oh, you came."

Tamsin smiled and nodded, mouthed, "Thank you."

"I got lost," Clancy said. "I meant to just bicycle out to the jetty to feed the seals. Next thing I find myself outside your dressing room."

Eleanor pushed back. "That's some fugue."

"I think I must be losing my mind."

"Well. It might be around here somewhere. We could take a look." Eleanor bent, making a pretense of looking under her chair.

Clancy heard some Elgar. One of the other women warming up. Good, but not as good as Eleanor.

Symond laughed.

Tamsin came over and gave Clancy a stiff hug. "Suddenly she's so animated," she whispered. "Thank you. I really didn't think—"

"It's all right," he said. "I'm glad to be here."

"Do you have a seat?" Eleanor said.

"I bought a ticket." He felt his chest clench.

"Yay, yay, yay! Yay-yay-yay-yay!"

She was so excited, so thrilled, not just to see him, but just to be here, to be on the stage again. He hoped that it worked out all right.

Eleanor turned to Tamsin. "He has to be in the wings. Has to."

"Eleanor."

The other cellist segued into a sonata by Surbier, and then into one by Brahms. She was very proficient.

"I think it's a good idea," Symond said. Again he put his hand on Clancy's.

"Yes, yes," Eleanor said. "Please."

"Okay," Clancy said. "Sure." He had the sense that Symond was suggesting subtly that Clancy should be getting implants for his arthritis.

Once upon a time it would have been considered an invasion of space, and Clancy had to remind himself he was in the city now. Social mores were different here, even with people from Parkes.

Tamsin nodded. "Yes. It's a good idea." She stared straight at Clancy. "You were her teacher."

"Only for a little while."

"I'm on in an hour," Eleanor said. She looked at the time. "An hour, fifteen."

"We should give you some space," Clancy said. "Let you two relax." She'd become edgy, excited since he'd arrived. He'd hate for that to turn into agitation. He'd only seen that a couple of times from her, but it would ruin the concentration she had.

"You'll be in the wings?" Eleanor said.

"Definitely."

"He'll need a pass," Tamsin said.

"We'll organize it," Symond said. He smiled at Clancy. "Back at the booth."

"See you then," Eleanor said. She leapt up at him again, kissing him on the cheek. "You're everything. Everything."

"I'm just a painter who listened to you play." He set her down on her feet. Much more of that and he was going to start breaking bones.

"You're too modest," she said. "You're the cellist who became a painter who became a teacher." She gave him another kiss on the cheek. "Now, away with you. Let me concentrate." She waved him off with a flourish.

"Okay," he said. "Good luck."

In the corridor he asked Symond about his hands. "Twice," Clancy said. "You touched them."

Symond shrugged. "I figure that you're going to get implants. I've seen how much you enjoy playing."

"A couple of visits," Clancy said.

"I mean since Eleanor came."

Clancy couldn't deny it. Over the years of leaving the cello behind, he'd come to miss it less and less. Painting occupied him. With Eleanor around, though, it had been different. She made the instrument sing, made it part of her. He wanted that again, despite his aging frame.

"We can do your hands, shoulders, elbows. It will be like you're eighteen again."

Clancy laughed. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"I am prone to exaggeration, but it would be better."

Clancy wondered if he would still paint. He asked Symond. "I make good money from that. It would be different with limber joints."

"Sure, but how much longer are you going to be painting anyway? How long before your hands are nothing more than knobbled claws and your elbows are swollen up like baseballs?"

"A few months, anyway."

Symond laughed.

They got the pass and found their way to the backstage area. Symond talked about how the procedure would work, and Clancy gave a noncommittal agreement to look into it when they got back.

A chamber quartet on stage played through a Borodin piece, ably but not exceptionally.

When the group brought the piece to a close, the audience clapped, politely but not rapturously. The musicians stood, bowed, and filed offstage. As they went by, Clancy heard one of the women muttering at one of the men. Clancy couldn't catch the words, but she was clearly agitated. Dissatisfied.

"A few more performers, then Eleanor," Symond said.

People milled around in the wings. Clancy and Symond sat on a bench seat at the back wall, letting the friends and family crowd up to the edges of the curtains. A piano stood on the stage, just at the edge of the lights, a pianist waiting near them on another bench seat, ready to accompany some of the soloists, if needed.

A solo violinist played some *Mfannlise*. A complex, lengthy capriccio that required a challenging mix of plucking and bowing. The dexterous young man pulled it off. The applause at the end rumbled around the auditorium. Clancy could imagine the crowd on their feet.

The man took his bows, overstaying his welcome really, before wandering from the stage with a haughty air as if all the adulation was expected and insufficient.

Eleanor and Tamsin joined them. Eleanor seemed bright and alert. She held her cello tightly.

"It will be fine," Tamsin told her. Clancy could imagine the phrase had been on repeat all afternoon.

More performers came and went, and then it was Eleanor's turn.

"Come," Eleanor said. They all followed the stage guide out to the edge of the curtains. Behind them, the next performers had lined up already. Another chamber quartet. They were over-perfumed and young. Clancy's nose wrinkled.

The concert leader called Eleanor's name across the PA. The audience clapped.

"Wish me luck," Eleanor whispered to Clancy.

"All the luck in the world," Clancy said. "You don't need it. You'll be fine." He realized he was echoing Tamsin.

"I will," Eleanor said. Her face was drawn. Terrified.

The clapping had subsided. They were waiting for her.

Clancy stepped forward, bent a little, and hugged her. "Eleanor," he whispered into her ear. "You are the finest cellist I've met. Now, play the way you played for me. That's all I'd ask."

She squeezed him back. "Thank you." She pulled away, her face lighter, a soft smile on her lips.

Tamsin touched her daughter's shoulder. Eleanor nodded and strode out onto the stage.

She sat, adjusted, and began to play.

Haydn. Concerto in C Major.

The bow swept across the strings with an elegance Clancy thought he should have been used to. It still moved him, made his throat clench up.

Behind him the other musicians jostled forward, straining to hear. Clancy moved aside a step as they craned in. No one spoke.

Eleanor's head bobbed as her arms worked. Her left fingers splayed, darting across the notes. Her eyes were closed.

Despite the silence from those around him—Tamsin, Symond and the musicians—he could sense their amazement, almost awe. She really was creative, Clancy thought. She really made the piece her own.

She stopped.

Silence.

The bow dropped.

Tamsin gasped. She put her hand to her mouth.

Eleanor's head lifted. She looked bewildered, unsure where she was and what was going on.

Tamsin took a step forward, but Symond put his hand on her shoulder.

"But she's—"

Symond cut her off, moving his fingers to her lips.

A murmur went around the audience. Another went around the waiting quartet.

Clancy looked at the cellist. A young woman, no older than Eleanor. The woman stared back wide-eyed.

"Please," Clancy said. "Your cello." He held his hands out for the instrument and the bow.

Less than five seconds had passed since Eleanor had stopped. The crowd was becoming restless. Eleanor stayed on the stage.

Clancy took the cello's neck. "Let me play," he said.

Startled, the woman let him take the instrument, and handed him the bow.

Clancy positioned his fingers and drew the bow across the open A string. The note resonated.

Eleanor looked up. Her bow lifted.

Clancy played a G and pulled the bow back firmly, slowly. It was awkward, standing with the instrument. He had the bow too high, and his wrist too angled.

Eleanor's bow touched the strings. She resumed the piece. In moments she was back with her own passion. She played and played.

Clancy continued, playing softly. His fingers ached. He played too many open strings. As Eleanor picked up the piece, Clancy stopped. He stood holding the bow and cello until she had finished.

The audience hesitated. Eleanor took a breath.

They clapped. A supportive, encouraging clap, though, not the excited, celebratory clap she deserved. Some gave her that. Clancy could hear some individuals over the crowd, clapping heartily, even some shouted "bravo"s. But Eleanor's break was too much for most of them, and the applause quickly subsided.

Eleanor stood and almost ran to the side of the stage. Tears ran down her face. She didn't stop, just barged through and raced on for the exit, endpin dragging on the ground.

Clancy handed the borrowed cello back. The woman nodded and managed a half a smile.

Following Tamsin and Symond out, Clancy felt heavy. He knew he should feel better, knew he should feel thrilled that she'd participated, and participated so phenomenally. But for the break—just a few seconds really—it had been a perfect performance.

Symond waited for him in the narrow corridor. Clancy gave him a nod and kept moving for the dressing rooms.

"You saved her," Symond said. "You saved the performance."

"Just about." Clancy wished that he'd thought to get the cello from the very start. He would have recognized the signs of her faltering. He'd seen it often enough to know. As soon as the bow dropped like that, he could have begun bowing immediately. The audience might not have even noticed.

He felt like he'd failed her.

"Really," Symond said. "She completed the piece."

Symond was right on that.

But it wasn't enough. He knew he could have done so much better.

They stopped outside the closed dressing room door. One of the other women—the one who'd practiced earlier—stood by the doorframe, leaning against the wall. She looked glum.

Symond knocked on the door and reached for the release.

"Wouldn't do that," the woman said. "If I were you, that is."

Symond dropped his hand and looked at Clancy.

"That's probably exactly why we should," Clancy said. He moved ahead and touched the release without knocking. The door slid aside.

Eleanor sat at the mirror, eyes red. Tamsin stood to one side, almost hiding away in the shadows.

Clancy went to Eleanor.

"So close," she whispered, staring at herself in the mirror.

"There'll be other times," he said. He put his hand on her shoulder. The slick satin of her dress was cool to the touch.

She looked up. "Are you going to be there to rescue me again?"

"You don't need—"

"I do," she said. "Isn't it obvious? I'm brain damaged. I can't maintain concentration."

Clancy didn't respond. "You should play with a quartet," he said. "Or an orchestra."

"Who would have me?"

"Anyone. Nialel."

Eleanor laughed. "You really think the NBO would take a risk like that?"

"Studio work," Symond said from the door. "Errors like that don't matter. They can edit."

Clancy glared at him. Symond raised his hand.

"She loves music so much," Tamsin said.

"I know," Clancy said.

"I think I need a better solution," Eleanor said. She looked down, then back up at Clancy.

"We should go eat," Symond said. "To celebrate."

"Hush," Tamsin told him.

"What do you mean 'a better solution'?" Clancy said.

Her eyes flicked to Symond. Back to Clancy.

"Please," he said. "I know that's not what you wanted."

"Things change," Tamsin said.

Clancy looked at her. Eleanor's mother seemed drawn, exhausted.

"Dr. Symond," Clancy said. "You'd perform an operation for her?"

"No," Symond said.

"But you've consulted?" Clancy felt furious. Who was this country doctor to go meddling with what Eleanor wanted and needed? Clancy had thought of Symond as a friend. Over the years they'd spent enough time together socially, as well as professionally. At Clancy's age it paid to have a good doctor, but Clancy was already considering alternative practitioners.

"They asked," Symond said.

"By 'they,' I'm guessing you mean Tamsin."

"I asked, too," Eleanor said. She was back to staring into the mirror. "I had to know."

"It's none of your business anyway," Tamsin said. "We appreciate all you've done for us, but the decision lies with Eleanor."

"You would—" Clancy began. Eleanor cut him off.

"I might lose my ability, my talent," she said. "My passion." She stood up. "My fire." She still wept, tears running fast down her cheeks, streaking her makeup and dripping to her dress.

"But she might not," Symond said.

Clancy took a breath. It was her decision anyway. Tamsin was right. It was none of his business. He just hated to see her losing what she had for some vague promise. He should know better, he thought. He should trust the medical process to do no harm.

He exhaled. "You performed magnificently today. I hope you continue to perform."

Eleanor nodded.

"I'm glad to know you. I hope I can get to see you again. I hope—"

Eleanor jumped up and grabbed him again, wrapping her arms around him. She squeezed so tight he thought he might have trouble breathing soon.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I hope I get to see you perform again," he whispered back.

"Of course."

Eventually she let go.

"We could go eat," Tamsin said. "I'm starved."

Eleanor and Symond agreed.

"I think I'll get going," Clancy said. "I'm not used to all this travel and bustle. And tomorrow's a big day. I'm flying back. I'd better head over to my hotel and get some sleep."

Eleanor gave him another hug. "Stay," she said. "Stay longer."

"I can't." He could. He could easily afford it, but it was so hard watching her like this. He wanted the memories of her at the house, practicing technique and talking about painting and seals and other planets.

"I understand," she said. She held his hand, rubbing her thumb across his rough knuckles.

He stepped back. "All right. Well done tonight. Do stay in touch."

Eleanor nodded. She sucked her lips in between her teeth and sniffed.

Clancy turned and left. The concert hall's foyer seemed bare as he walked through it. A few people stood talking, but the crowds from earlier were all inside the auditorium. He heard distant muffled clapping as another performer finished.

He walked along Molenstraat in the dark. He'd lost track of time, but it was already late.

At the hotel, he packed and stood staring out the window.

He hoped she made the right choice. He felt privileged to have known her. Known her the way she was, damaged but passionate. He hoped that if she did have the implant it didn't change her too much.

He rubbed his own knuckles. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps, when he got back, he should talk to Symond about getting something done about his hands.

The rains came. The deluge seemed to last months, with barely a clear day. The seals flopped into his yard as the lake rose until it butted up against the balcony's sill. The jetty's deck was just inches above the surface.

The land turned soft and lush, and then sodden. Water lay in great, shallow lakes across the fields. The grasslands and forests became verdant and overgrown. Clancy had to hack a path through the vines and ferns to get to the jetty.

He painted.

He propagated a new vine. The fungus didn't return. The plants took and swelled out along the wall. If the weather ever dried out to something like a regular climate, he would have grapes in six months.

He allowed Symond to fix his hands. And he could play again, without pain, without hesitation. Perhaps he had learned more from Eleanor than he'd realized. He would never have her level of mastery, or her passion, but he would be a better teacher, if he ever chose that again.

Even the painting was easier. His works became more dexterous and detailed, though he feared they were losing something about him that made them distinct and special. But they continued to sell.

Like Eleanor, he thought, he needed to trust himself.

He chided himself for thinking of her too much.

The house built him a pool table, upstairs in Eleanor's old room. Often he played alone, but Symond visited regularly. He would stay for an afternoon, and they would play several games.

"Perhaps you should get some land out here," Clancy told him one day. They'd played a half-dozen games. Clancy was up four to two.

"See," Symond said, racking another game, "then I'd just want to get a boat, and maybe a plane. A float plane. And then I'd be spending all week at the surgery wishing I could get out and use them more. I like this. It's good we're still friends."

"You need friends your own age," Clancy said. He bent over the cue and took aim. The felt itched his skin. He shot the white down like a darting seal. The triangle split apart with a crack. Two balls dropped into pockets.

Clancy was glad of the company. He'd lived here alone for too long. Eleanor had changed things for him. Every day he wished he would stop missing her so much.

"I should never have fixed your fingers," Symond said.

Clancy laughed. Symond made the same joke every time they played.

"And I'm fine," Symond said, rounding on the table. "I'm not that young. Most people my age have grown children and are done." He bent, aimed, and took his shot. The white clicked against the seven, which bounced off the cushion and settled back in the middle of the table.

"Maybe you should have a child, then?" Clancy said. He looked away from the table. He could hear a drone in the distance.

Symond shrugged. "I guess that's technically possible. Maybe you should take an offworld vacation. Go see some of your paintings on the walls in the palaces and parliament buildings."

Clancy kept listening. A vehicle was approaching. "More like corporate lobbies and private collections," he said. He went to the window. Through the pelting rain he saw the stir and flicker of an echo transport coming along the access road.

"Expecting company?" Symond said.

"You're here already."

They left the game and went downstairs to the patio. The transport turned through the gate and came to a stop.

Eleanor climbed out.

"Well," Clancy said. He stepped down to his muddy yard and walked through the rain toward her.

She was wearing a long parka, a hood over her head, droplets bouncing off in a spray and running down in shimmering rivulets.

Right away he could tell something was up. Her gait was different. The way she carried herself had changed. A lift in her shoulders, a new smoothness to her stride. She'd never been awkward, but now she moved like a dancer, like someone who fitted perfectly within her body.

"Clancy," she said as he came close. "We should get out of the weather." Even over the hiss of the rain he could hear the change in her voice too.

And her eyes. They held a new spark, and new awareness.

"What have you done?" he said.

"We're getting drenched," she said. She reached out and took his hand, glanced down and up. "What have *you* done?"

"I got my . . ." He glanced back. "Come inside."

At the patio she slipped the parka off and hugged Symond. Inside, she went straight into the front room, overlooking the lake.

"I didn't know the water ever came so high," she said. "Won't you get flooded?"

"The Messier falls," Clancy said, standing in the doorway. "They're huge now, but the water just can't get any higher."

"Of course. I like your painting. It's very different." She stayed in the middle of the room, facing the lake, his latest canvas slightly to her right. "It's very earthy."

The picture was of a plain of cracked mud, mountains in the distance, and a stone with a long-antennaed cricket standing on top in the foreground.

"Funny," he said, not feeling like laughing. The old Eleanor would never have been quite like this, conversational and stand-offish. "I started painting the dryness just as the rains began. I just kept on."

Eleanor laughed and turned. "Boy, it really is raining, no?"

Symond stood just behind Clancy. "Did you have the operation?" the doctor said. "The implant?"

She blinked and turned away again. "You got your hands taken care of, Clancy," she said. "I felt it in them. I couldn't imagine you painting like this unless you had."

"I did," he said.

No one said anything for a moment. The only sound, the rain pounding the balcony and windows.

"I suppose you've been accepted into an orchestra now?" Clancy said.

"You kept our rooms," Eleanor said. There was a catch in her voice as if she was crying. "I saw the shape of the house as I drove in."

"It's a pool room now," he said. "We were playing when you drove up."

"He's an agile player," Symond said. "With the way . . . his hands are now."

"Good," Eleanor said.

A seal barked out on the lake.

Symond stepped around Clancy. "It's good to see you. Sorry I can't stay."

Clancy smiled to himself at Symond's perception. There had been no plans for him to leave just yet.

"You're going?" Eleanor said.

"I have a busy week ahead."

"Will you let me play?" she said. "Before you go. My playing's stronger now. I even wrote a piece."

Clancy just caught the last few words. She'd written something? Good for her.

"Well," Symond said. "I figure you two have some catch—"

"Stay," Clancy said. "She'll be going for good, leaving the planet for her new orchestra."

"The Nialel Bach," Eleanor said.

"What you've always wanted."

"It's light years away," she said. "I'll never . . ." She turned to face him directly. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Clancy managed a smile, his heart quickening.

"Then you should play for us," Symond said. "If it's the last time we'll hear you."

Eleanor nodded. She went to the chair near the windows. Clancy's cello stood in its stand next to the chair.

Symond moved to the sofa against the wall and sat. Clancy stayed where he was.

Eleanor sat. She took the bow and the cello's neck and quickly tuned the instrument.

"Elgar," she said quietly. She played quickly. Clancy knew the piece—of course, he thought—the Cello Concerto in E Minor, Opus eighty-five. The complex array of darting and sustained opening notes sounding proficient and competent under her fingers. She raced through the piece, playing faster than he was used to, settling away from the opening deeper notes into the higher phrases. Her left fingers darted up the neck.

She played perfectly.

Too perfectly, Clancy thought. The notes were less an interpretation—as he was used to from her—than a rendition of the score. Certainly it was skilled, but something was missing.

He saw she was crying as she played. She ran through from the adagio to the lento. Clancy listened.

As she began the second adagio, he realized that she hadn't faltered at all. Every note came perfectly.

Clancy had to go sit on the sofa too. Despite the arthritis implants—he'd had more than just his hands worked on—his legs were still those of an octogenarian.

Eleanor played the whole piece without a break. She wept on as she bowed with precision and concentration.

Beside Clancy, Symond sniffed. It was a powerful piece, Clancy knew, able to make people weep, but part of what was moving was seeing the depth of Eleanor's sadness with it. Clancy wondered if Symond realized that it was something more than the music.

Clancy wanted to take her and hold her close. He remembered her as so young and innocent, almost as a child. During her time with him, he'd had to remind himself that she was an adult, that it was just her injury that made her personality seem so youthful.

And now she'd grown up.

She drew out the final notes, playing them long and sustained, the bow at the limit of where it could produce a note.

Symond began clapping the moment the bow came away from the strings. Clancy joined him. Eleanor sobbed. She turned away, looking out over the swollen lake.

Symond went to stand, but Clancy put his hand on the doctor's shoulder. Going to her, Clancy took the cello.

Eleanor looked up.

"Perfect," he said. "I could never have shown you that."

She sniffed, licked a tear from the corner of her mouth. "It took my soul," she said. "That implant robbed me."

He knew what she meant, though he wouldn't have put it so strongly.

"What's that?" Symond said. "That was amazing."

"Yes," Eleanor said. "Thank you. But where's my verve? Where's the passion?"

"You're in the orchestra."

"Why didn't you play us your piece?" Clancy said. "Why Elgar?"

"My piece?"

"You wrote something. You mentioned it."

"Oh." Her face brightened. "I've never played it to anyone."

"You once told me you weren't creative," he said.

Eleanor nodded. "It kind of came to me. As I was trying out for the orchestra again."

"Would you play it?"

"Kind of embarrassing," she said.

"Exactly what I thought when I started painting. A successful musician tries his hand at art? At oils, yet?"

"I'm not you."

"Thank goodness," he said. "You really don't want to be me." He held the neck out to her again and went back to the sofa.

"All right," she said. "Don't expect anything great here."

But from the first few bars, Clancy knew she had something special. She jumped notes so unexpectedly, yet so perfectly. She threw her finger down the A string as she bowed, rising with almost a pentatonic scale, but then leaping up quickly to bow the C with a D, E, E, all as fast distinct quavers, to the D string. Sometimes she used martelé, pinching the strings before quickly bowing, sometimes she bounced the bow with a sautille. The piece felt rich and full.

As she played, he found that he stopped listening to the notes technically, and gathered in the flow of the piece. She went on and on, moving to some unusual, but strong, vibrato and gave him chills.

Her piece lasted for close to a quarter hour. As she rose into a gigue, the notes became fast and high, almost a crescendo, and she moved to a 9/8 signature. In his imagination, Clancy could hear the orchestra behind her, the violins supporting her notes with their octaves-higher harmonies, the kettle drums rolling and pounding with a drama befitting the strings.

She finished on a high, the last note ringing through the sunroom.

Holding her head down for a moment, she stared at the floor and lifted the bow away from the strings. She looked up, beaming a brilliant, glistening smile.

Clancy and Symond applauded. Symond hollered a few "bravo"s.

"I think we should have pancakes," Eleanor said.

After Symond left, with hugs, Clancy and Eleanor walked out to the jetty under an echo umbrella. The swirling field at the pole's tip scattered the rain, creating a kind of miniature localized storm behind them. Clancy carried a stack of pancakes wrapped in a tea towel.

"You wrote that," Clancy said. It was half-question, half statement. Almost, he thought, a statement of surprise, if not incredulity.

"Shhh," she said. "Let me enjoy the forest. We can talk out on the jetty."

Water sluiced around their feet. The old worn path that had been so dry and white had become a stream. The sides were beginning to erode away.

The jetty's deck, Clancy noticed when they reached it, had become a raised grid-work. The house had reconfigured it to make it even less slippery from the rain. As

they walked along, without the protection of the trees, more spray slipped around the echo, dampening their legs.

Eleanor sat at the end, dangling her feet into the water. "Oh, cold," she said.

Clancy stood the umbrella up and sat beside her, immediately feeling the surface water soaking through his pants. He crossed his legs—a new luxury—keeping his feet away from the lake. He unwrapped the pancakes.

"I thought the implant would help me concentrate," Eleanor said. She took one of the pancakes and spun it out over the lake.

"That worked. Aside from the Hadyn at the festival, I've never heard you play longer than four or five minutes. That concerto is close to a half hour."

"And my own piece is fifteen minutes. You helped at the festival."

He waved that off. "You told me you didn't write." He took a pancake, rolled it and took a bite. Sweet and maple-y. The house had come up with a technique to cook the syrup right into the mixture. It lost the romance of pouring, but in weather like this, it was convenient.

"You're eating?" she said.

"Lunch."

"Ah, just feed the seals." Eleanor threw another pancake out. A seal bobbed up and swished away with it.

Clancy finished his. He threw the next one out.

"After the operation," Eleanor said, "I played like that, like you heard. Sustained and focused, but . . ."

Clancy didn't say anything.

"Well?" she said. "What did you hear?"

"You were very proficient."

"Say it," she said. "There was no passion, no light. I listened to some old home recordings of myself. There was something invigorating about them."

"Yes," Clancy said. "Even when you were here and, well, dropping out in those moments, you had a fire."

"It's the trade off," she said. "I can play in the orchestra, but I'll never be the soloist." "I'm sorry."

Eleanor shrugged. "Few enough can anyway."

"But you could have been."

"Before the accident, maybe. But now I can play a whole piece. That's got to be good."

"You seemed so sad. I wept with you."

"Don't. See, even if I'm not soloing, I'm a composer now. And that's even rarer."

"The implant?"

She nodded. She took a pancake, rolled it up and ate it.

"I thought those were for the seals."

"Sure. They're not going to be able to eat this whole stack. The lake's so full, there must be plenty of fish for them."

They sat eating, chatting, and feeding the seals until the stack of pancakes was gone. They walked back, the rain easing a little. Eleanor climbed into her transport.

"I'll come back," she said. "I'll come see you."

"That would be nice," he told her. "But don't feel obliged. I do have one request, though."

Eleanor smiled. "I thought you'd ask. I nearly forgot." She reached into the vehicle's glove compartment and took out a slim screen. "I'm glad you liked it."

He took the sheet and squeezed the corner. The first page of a score scrolled onto its face. *Cello Sonata One, in A Major* it read across the top. On the next line, by Eleanor Birchall.

On the next line it read, *For Clancy Jonah*.

Clancy swallowed. "That's very generous," he said, barely able to get the words out.

Eleanor stepped from the transport and wrapped her arms around him. She held tight, and he hugged back.

"I'll see you again," she said. "I promise."

The umbrella tipped and fell into the puddles. Rain washed over them.

She didn't let go.

"I know," he said, though he knew it was but a distant possibility. She would be on Nialel, playing in all the vast concert halls, and he would be here out in the country, light years away. He would pass on before this young woman would be able to tear herself away from those demands, however well-meaning she might be.

"Next year," she said, still clinging to him.

"Next year's good."

She let go, stepped back, tears hidden in the rain running down her face. "I'd better go. I'll start bawling soon."

"Me too," Clancy said. He already was, tears streaming.

Eleanor smiled and ducked her head. She got into the transport and wound up the echo. The vehicle lifted off the ground. Eleanor waved to him. The whole thing turned and moved away, seeming to swim off into the rain.

Clancy stood waving until she was well down the access road, until well after he would have been lost to her in the haze.

Inside he dried off and went to the front room. He set the slim screen on his music stand and took up the cello. The bow felt so familiar in his hand.

Pressing the strings to the neck, he began bowing, drawing out the first note the way Eleanor had. By the end of the second bar, he had the rhythm of her sonata.

For Clancy.

He wept at its beauty as he played. Even if she never came back, he would always have this part of her, right here by the lake. ○

The Garden of Unearthly Delights

Hknown primarily for her novels, Delia Sherman now graces us with her debut story collection, *Young Woman in a Garden* (Small Beer Press, trade paper, \$16.00, 300 pages, ISBN 978-1618730916), and proves she is as adroit at shorter lengths as she is with longer narratives.

The title story comes first, and it's an Aickmanesque gem, even, to my ears, semi-echoing in its title the older writer's "Pages from a Young Girl's Journal." Our protagonist is Theresia, a young scholar of art who has fixed upon a little-known Victorian painter, Edouard Beauvoisin. Journeying to conduct researches at his homestead-cum-museum, she encounters odd caretakers, secret troves of notebooks, and some timeslippery moments that lead to revelations. One can picture the story being filmed by Eric Rohmer.

"The Ghost of Cwmlech Manor" is a humorous delight, a kind of steampunk version of Thorne Smith's *Topper*. Queen Victoria sits on the throne of a uchronic United Kingdom where sophisticated mechanical servants are not uncommon. Tacy Gof, our narrator, is a bright young woman employed as a housekeeper at the manor in question, a charming shambles of a place seeing out its last sad days—unless Tacy can convince Sir Arthur, a young inventor and adherent to rationalism, of the existence of the ghost that knows of ancestral buried treasure. Sherman's great coinage of "humantron" in place of android is merely icing on the cake.

A hearty, spiderweb-draped slice of atmospheric Gothicism is "The Red Piano." This story is illustrative of Sherman's capacity to evoke numerous differentiated voices. This time around, we listen to the tale through the perceptions of Dr. Arantxa Waters, something of an unsatisfied

spinster who focuses all her energies and thoughts into her archaeological career—until the day she meets an alluring neighbor named Roderick Hawthorne (and could a better conflation of Poe and Nathaniel H. ever be coined?). A subtle vampirism mediated through music ensues, until Dr. Waters's heroic overturning of the tables.

Manly Wade Wellman or Andy Duncan would have been proud to have written "The Fiddler of Bayou Teche," a true tall tale in Cajun style, concerning a swamp girl, a Satanic violin player, and the competition between them.

"La Fée Verte" concerns two prostitutes in a Paris brothel before and during the Prussian siege of that city. Victorine is somewhat vain and self-concerned, while the lady who bears the titular designation is aloof and mysterious, seemingly a sibyl. Into and out of each other's lives the two women orbit, with big historical doings in the background, until their final climactic meeting.

Imagine if Fritz Leiber had written an episode of *Bewitched* (a show, of course, derivative of his famous *Conjure Wife*). The result might resemble the light-hearted "Walpurgis Afternoon," in which an Addams-Family-style manse suddenly materializes on a vacant suburban lot. Inhabited by two witches, the establishment is rather placidly accepted by its mortal neighbors, who have little idea what wonders lie in store for them.

A crippled sailor named Saltree is forced to undertake lighthouse duty in "Land's End," but eventually discovers that if he cannot go to sea, the sea will come for him.

One has to love a story that features a throwaway character named "Sir Omicron Pie," who appears briefly in "The Parwat Ruby." Rife with all the juicy language and period conceits that make the best steampunk so enjoyable, this tale of

a cursed ring would not seem amiss issuing from the pens of Saints Blaylock or Powers.

With all the elegance and resonance of a real fairy tale, "The Faerie Cony-Catcher" chronicles the fate of a lusty young goldsmith who ends up in Elvish courts, forced to strike a bargain for his freedom. He ends up with a lover as well, whose nature remains for the reader to learn.

"Sacred Harp" features a contemporary setting, and is compacted into a brief choral interlude that takes a mystical turn. More expansive is "The Printer's Daughter," a delightful tale of a "puppet made of paper," a changeling named Frisket who comes to the aid of the beleaguered printer named Hal Spurtle. Echoes of Pinocchio strike fruitful notes. And "Nancy Peters and the Feathery Bride" stands shoulder to shoulder in tall-tale exuberance with "The Fiddler of Bayou Teche."

The final two stories—"Miss Carstairs and the Merman" and "The Maid on the Shore"—form a perfect duo, both being concerned with aquatic anomalies. A hint of Avram Davidson eccentricity enlivens the former, while the latter shows justice delivered with savage glee.

The only flaw in this collection is that there are not more stories on the table of contents. You need this in your library.

Eterna Moonshine of the Spotted Mind

The alert book-shopper will find an advance-publication quote from me adorning the front cover of Leanna Renee Hieber's novel *The Eterna Files* (Tor, hardcover, \$24.99, 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-7653-5674-5). Without much real acquaintance with the author, I was motivated to provide a quote based sheerly on the high quality of the book. So I thought I would use a small amount of this column to explicate my admiration further.

The novel falls squarely into the steam-punk genre, but exhibits a richer helping of metaphysics than is common in that

game, and a bit more gravitas. Hieber's MacGuffin is the quest for immortality, surely a subject that can bear the symbolic weight. In the wake of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, a small group of eccentric talents are given the assignment of learning how to defeat death. Chief among these is our heroine, Clara Templeton, a psychic. We pick up her tale when the project is at a crisis point after many years. Several of the researchers have been brutally murdered, including Clara's lover. Is the project doomed, or so close to success that it has aroused great powers?

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the British government has learned of the Eterna project and decided to steal or preempt it. They have assigned London detective Harold Spire to the case, and given him the assistance of the redoubtable Rose Everhart. Needless to say, presented with such a formidable array of allies and antagonists, many sparks, supernatural and otherwise, are going to fly.

Hieber's approach to the "science" of anti-death protocols is fascinating. (She even gets in a nod to Clarke's Third Law: "All sciences, at their zenith, create what is tantamount to sorcery.") Blending a kind of alchemy with unique "patriotic magic," the pursuit assumes epistemological magnitude. Says Louis, Clara's lover (who continues to play a role as a ghost), "The key of Eterna, *ma chérie*, is to determine the boundaries of meaning. Nothing that may have meaning in terms of life can be overlooked." This is a wide remit, and eventually Clara comes to wonder if they have bitten off more than they can chew. "Eterna was full of the restless living and the restless dead. It needed to die once and for all."

Rich in conceits as anything from Alan Moore, Hieber's novel mixes action and the emotional lives of its characters into a fascinating stew. Anyone who enjoyed Paul Cornell's *London Falling* and *The Severed Streets* will certainly cozy up to Hieber's parallel depiction of questioning savants and heroes versus the forces of anarchy and despair.

Happiness Is a Warm Glock Named Janie

The debut novel from W.S. Bauers, *Unbreakable* (Tor, hardcover, \$25.99, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0-7653-7542-1), has nothing to do with the rather pallid post-modern and confused film of the same name that issued from the brain of auteur M. Night Shyamalan some years ago. In fact, in its bullish assuredness and forthright action-packed ethos, the novel might be the polar opposite of that cinematic deconstruction of superheroes. Put *Unbreakable* the movie in the same room as *Unbreakable* the book and they might self-destruct like matter and antimatter. No, Bauers's novel is hardcore military SF straight from the loins of Heinlein and Pournelle and Drake, but with a smattering of genes from A. Bertram Chandler and Poul Anderson and Christopher Anvil as well, making it not a slavish imitation, but rather a smart synthesis of its ancestors.

We are some eight hundred years into the future. Earth is a dead globe due to war, but humanity is flourishing, spread across the galaxy. Two rival empires contend for the allegiance of undecided planets: The Republic of Aligned Worlds—RAW—and the Lusitanian Empire, which comes complete with Queen and other royal accoutrements. As you might guess, the reader's sympathies are intended to match up with RAW (although the Lusitanians are not depicted as Darth Vader-like monsters by any means). And so we find our attention fixed on one Promise T. Paen, a grunt-level female marine in the RAW forces. Early chapters (Bauers believes in quick-paced, short segments that generally work well) detail her tragic childhood on the unaligned planet named Montana. Left an orphan, Promise eventually finds a substitute for family in the marines. Although of course she does also have the chatty and wise, intermittently appearing ghost of her mother for counsel. This apparition is presented not as anything delusional or neurotic, but as an inexplicable aspect of the natural

universe. In the end, it's no more contra-SF than the Force in *Star Wars*. Promise's matriarchal legacy is further embodied in her antique but highly functional Glock pistol, nicknamed "Janie."

Soon Promise and her platoon find themselves assigned to protect her homeworld of Montana, which is leaning toward RAW affiliation. The Lusitanians show up and must, by treaty, be allowed to land peacefully. But soon things heat up to a shooting war, and Promise and company have to do all they can against great odds to preserve their honor and the freedoms of Montana.

Bauers exhibits great gusto in the battle scenes of his tale, but almost as much relish for the political shenanigans, in the manner of the aforementioned Anvil and Anderson. Because no aliens are involved, any of the xenophobia that often seeps into military SF is nonexistent. As I said, the Lusitanians come off as honorable foes. The large cast of soldiers, and smaller cast of civilians, receive nice distinguishing touches. (Although I do question the wisdom of naming Promise's boyfriend Jean-Wesley and then conferring the name of Sir Wesley on the Lusitanian commander, without any apparent significance in the synchronicity.) This colorful individuation wrings the maximum sadness out of the inevitable deaths, and by the post-battle coda, readers will certainly share Promise's sorrow and pride.

Billed as the first installment in the chronicles of Promise Paen, *Unbreakable* is a charming blitzkrieg, if such an oxymoron is allowable.

Servants of the Vance

Who among the field's best short-story writers has seen their entire oeuvre reprinted in any kind of uniform edition? James Tiptree and Cordwainer Smith qualify, I think, but their output was sparse, more or less one large volume apiece. Robert Sheckley had an encompassing edition from Pulphouse some decades ago, but it was incomplete. NESFA Press has done good work

with Kornbluth, Anderson, Clement, Oliver, Tenn, and Zelazny, among others. Philip K. Dick's canon fills a neat five volumes. There was an abortive attempt to do Simak up right, but it ended after two volumes. Lafferty is currently getting a series of deluxe compilations that might bring everything of his back into print. The "gold standard" examples are certainly North Atlantic's *Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, whose installments I have reviewed in these pages, and Haffner Press's scrupulous tribute to Jack Williamson.

Subterranean Press has done a bang-up job with Robert Silverberg's short fiction—never complete, given his enormous output, including lesser "hack" work he wants forgotten. And Subterranean have now, under the thoughtful aegis of editors Terry Dowling and Jonathan Strahan, issued five volumes of Jack Vance's short fiction, which goes a long way toward accumulating his tales. *Grand Crusades* (hardcover, \$45.00, 472 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-710-3) is the latest, and it's just as fine as the previous four. A particular bargain, in fact, since it includes several short novels long gone out of print.

First up is "The Rapparee," better known as *The Five Gold Bands*. Charming thief Paddy Blackthorn finds himself possessed of the secret to the coveted stardrive monopoly—but only in the form of a set of five clues that find him darting hither and yon across the galaxy, in the company of the deft and piquant secret agent Fay Bursill. This quest, adroitly implemented, reveals how much Vance owed to the caper genre. Picture it filmed by Hitchcock and starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn.

Vance loved tales of righteously revenge-driven men—call it the "Monte Cristo motif"—and "Crusade to Maxus" is one such. Dyle Travec arrives on the slaver planet of Maxus, seeking to redeem his kidnapped family. He finds his only strategy lies in helping the Overmen track down a rogue. But the trail brings him to the strange culture of Oro on Fell, where the beautiful woman named

Mardien is both ally and foe. There's more plot and less exoticism here than in some tales, but still a rollicking ride.

Although a love story of sorts can be found at the heart of "Gold and Iron" (*Slaves of the Claw*), it is far from sentimental. In fact, this tale that echoes "Crusade to Maxus" in its depiction of interstellar slavery is both harrowing and inspiring, with an indomitable hero and many twists to the plot.

"The Houses of Iszm" is pure pioneering biopunk—the planet Iszm knows how to grow houses and other products from seeds—that is rendered only a tad less than perfect by a Vancian protagonist who is more passive and put-upon than wontedly proactive. And finally, "Space Opera," in which Dame Isabel Grayce conceives of taking culture to the stars and enlists her hapless nephew Roger Wool, is pure shambolic, picaresque fun, threaded with the melancholy subplot involving an alluring exile from the stars named Madoc Roswyn.

Vance's Grandmaster prime started maybe ten years after these pieces were published, and yet these early effusions remain eminently enjoyable, and might have constituted a sizable career for any lesser talent.

Veni, Vidi, Venus

So far as I can ascertain, we can date the start of the editing career of Gardner Dozois to the 1972 anthology *A Day in the Life*. This means we are a couple of years too late to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of his editorial prowess, but still have plenty of time to get ready for the forty-fifth in 2017. But whatever year of accomplishment he has attained, Dozois has certainly entered the ranks of legendary editors in the field: John W. Campbell and Horace Gold; Cele Goldsmith and Judith Merrill—the honor roll is exclusive, but is still being augmented by living folks like Dozois, Datlow, and Hartwell.

The newest instance of Dozois's discernment is *Old Venus* (Bantam, hardcover, \$30.00, 608 pages, ISBN

978-0345537287), a companion volume to *Old Mars*. (Oh, yeah, no disrespect: some guy with the initials of GRRM has a guiding hand in this enterprise, too!) I'd like to recount and analyze at length the sixteen superior stories herein, which all play with the old SF tropes of a habitable, wet Venus, but space does not permit, and so I shall only examine a few favorites.

What interests me particularly is that the authors cluster into clumps regarding the common theme, following literary strange attractors larger than any individual. One set of stories seeks to recreate the *Planet Stories* ambiance with straight-faced fidelity. That is the approach taken by Lavie Tidhar with "The Drowned Celestial." An Earthman adventurer named Colt teams up with a similar freebooter native Venusian named Sharol and encounters weird menace in ancient ruins. Likewise with Joe Lansdale's "The Wizard of the Trees" and Mike Resnick's "The Godstone of Venus."

Then there are folks who produce quintessential twenty-first-century state-of-the-art SF that just happens to be set in an impossible venue. Here I

group Paul McAuley and his "Planet of Fear" and Joe Haldeman with "Living Hell." (Most of the writers in this volume owe a debt to Harry Harrison's *Death-world* for their picture of a killer ecology.)

Some of the contributors take a lateral move, like Matthew Hughes with "Greeves and the Evening Star," a Wodehouse-in-space amusement. Some use Venus as an arena for Byronic psychodramas, à la Zelazny and Ballard. Here we find Stephen Leigh's "Bones of Air, Bones of Stone" and Ian McDonald's "Botanica Veneris: Thirteen Papercuts by Ida Countess Ratahangan."

But my favorite tale herein does something unique. It harks to the surreal estrangement of E. R. Eddison or David Lindsay. Gwyneth Jones, in "A Planet Called Desire," sends her John Carter-style hero, John Forrest, off to Venus by quasi-mystical means, and there he encounters a sensually psychedelic environment centered around a native woman named Sek. The tale is "The Weird" at its most affecting.

Hats off to Messrs. Dozois and Martin for their combined editorial excellence! ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The bidding for the right to hold the 2017 World SF Convention has really put the “World” in “WorldCon”—four cities in four countries. Check ‘em out and vote for your favorites. I’ll be at Sasquan, naturally. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week’s cons), leave a message and I’ll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 2015

- 14–16—LICon. For info, write: 20 Peachtree Ct. #1031, Holbrook NY 11741. Or phone: (516) 382-8297 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) www.li-con.org. (E-mail) info@li-con.org. Con will be held in: Ronkonkoma NY (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Clarion (formerly Holiday Inn). Guests will include: Peter David, Andy Weir, J. Rennie, D. Mack. By the people who brought us ICon.
- 13–16—PulpFest. www.pulpfest.com. Hyatt, Columbus OH. For fans of old pulp magazines.
- 14–16—Fandemonium. www.fandemonium.org. Grove Hotel, Boise ID. Theme: “Hope Reborn.” SF, fantasy, horror, comics, gaming.
- 14–16—When Words Collide. www.whenwordscollide.org. Delta South, Calgary AB. Readers and writers of written SF, fantasy, horror.
- 14–16—OnyxCon. www.onyxcon.com. Atlanta GA. Impact, contributions and presence of the African Diaspora in realms of imagination.
- 14–16—Creation. (818) 4089-0960. www.creationent.com. Dallas TX. Commercial Vampire Diaries event.
- 14–16—Creation. (818) 4089-0960. www.creationent.com. Chicago IL. Commercial Stargate event.
- 14–16—Maltese Fur Con. www.maltesefurcon.com. Embassy Suites, Waltham (Boston) MA. Folks into masquerading as cartoon animals.
- 14–16—Intervention. www.interventioncon.com. Hilton, Rockville MD. Celebrating Internet creativity in all its forms.
- 19–23—Sasquan. www.sasquan.org. Spokane WA. David Gerrold. The 2015 World Science Fiction Convention. Join at the door for \$210.
- 19–23—EuroFurence. www.eurofurence.org. Estrel Hotel, Berlin, Germany. Theme: “Greenhouse World.” Folks dressed as cartoon animals.
- 20–23—NecronomiCon. www.necronomicon-providence.com. Providence RI. “H. P. Lovecraft Homecoming.” HPL’s 125th birthday.
- 21–23—Geek.Kon. www.geekkon.net. Marriott West, Madison WI. Greg Weisman. Anime, SF and gaming.
- 21–23—Creation. (818) 4089-0960. www.creationent.com. Minneapolis IN. Commercial Supernatural event.
- 21–23—LiburniCon. www.liburnicon.com (for English, click union jack, upper right). Opatija, Croatia. SF, fantasy and multi-media.
- 28–30—BuboniCon, 933 San Mateo Blvd. NE #500-208, Albuquerque NM 87108. (505) 559-0931. www.bubonicon.com. Pierce, Valente.
- 28–30—Creation, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. Or contact as above. Vancouver BC. Commercial Supernatural event.

SEPTEMBER 2015

- 4–6—Mephit FurMeet. www.mephitfurmeet.org. Whispering Woods Hotel, Olive Branch MS. Folks dressed up like cartoon animals.
- 4–6—SacAnime. www.sacanime.com. Sheraton Grand, Sacramento CA. Might Morphin Power Rangers performers. Anime.
- 4–6—Nan Desu Kan. www.ndkdenver.org. Sheraton Downtown, Denver CO. Voice actor Alexis Tipton, producer Jonathan Klein. Anime.
- 4–7—DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (404) 669-0773. www.dragoncon.org. Huge multi-media event. Five-figure attendance.
- 4–7—AnimeFest. www.animefest.org. Sheraton, Dallas TX. Artists A. Tanemura and K. McGuire, director Ian Sinclair, DJ Starlight. Anime.
- 5—National Book Festival. www.loc.gov/bookfest. National Mall, Washington DC. David McCullough, Steve Jobs’ biographer Walter Isaacson.
- 5–6—TraCon. www.tracon.fi. Tampere, Finland. SF, fantasy and horror.
- 10–13—Oxonmoot. www.tolkiensociety.org. St. Antony’s College, North Oxford, UK. Academic conference on works of J. R. R. Tolkien.
- 11–13—Creation, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. Or contact as above. Dallas TX. Commercial Supernatural event.
- 18–20—Monsterpalooza. www.monsterpalooza.com. Marriott, Burbank (Los Angeles) CA. Horror film.

AUGUST 2016

- 17–21—MidAmeriCon II, Box 16, Santa Rosa CA 95402. www.midamericon2.org. Kansas City MO. Kinuko Y. Craft. WorldCon. \$170.

AUGUST 2017

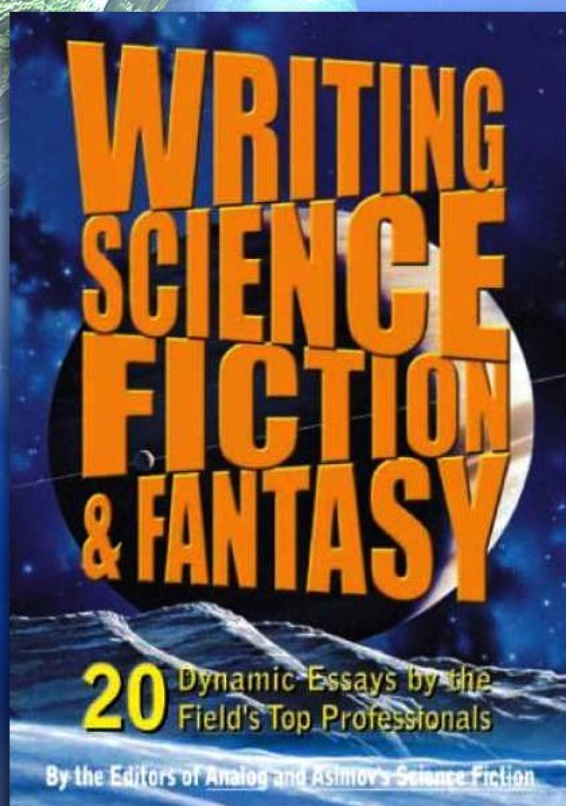
- 9–13—Helsinki in 2017. www.helsinkiin2017.org. Messekeskus Expo Centre, Helsinki, Finland. A bid for the 2017 World SF Convention.
- 16–20—Washington DC in 2017, c/o Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. www.dc17.org. Marriott Wardman Park. WorldCon bid.
- 17–21—Montreal in 2017, Box 34528, St-Laurent QC H4R 1Y0. www.montrealin2017.ca. Palais de Congres, Montreal QC. WorldCon bid.
- 24–28—Nippon in 2017. www.nippon2017.org. Granship Convention and Arts Center, Shizuoka, Japan. 2017 World SF Convention bid.

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